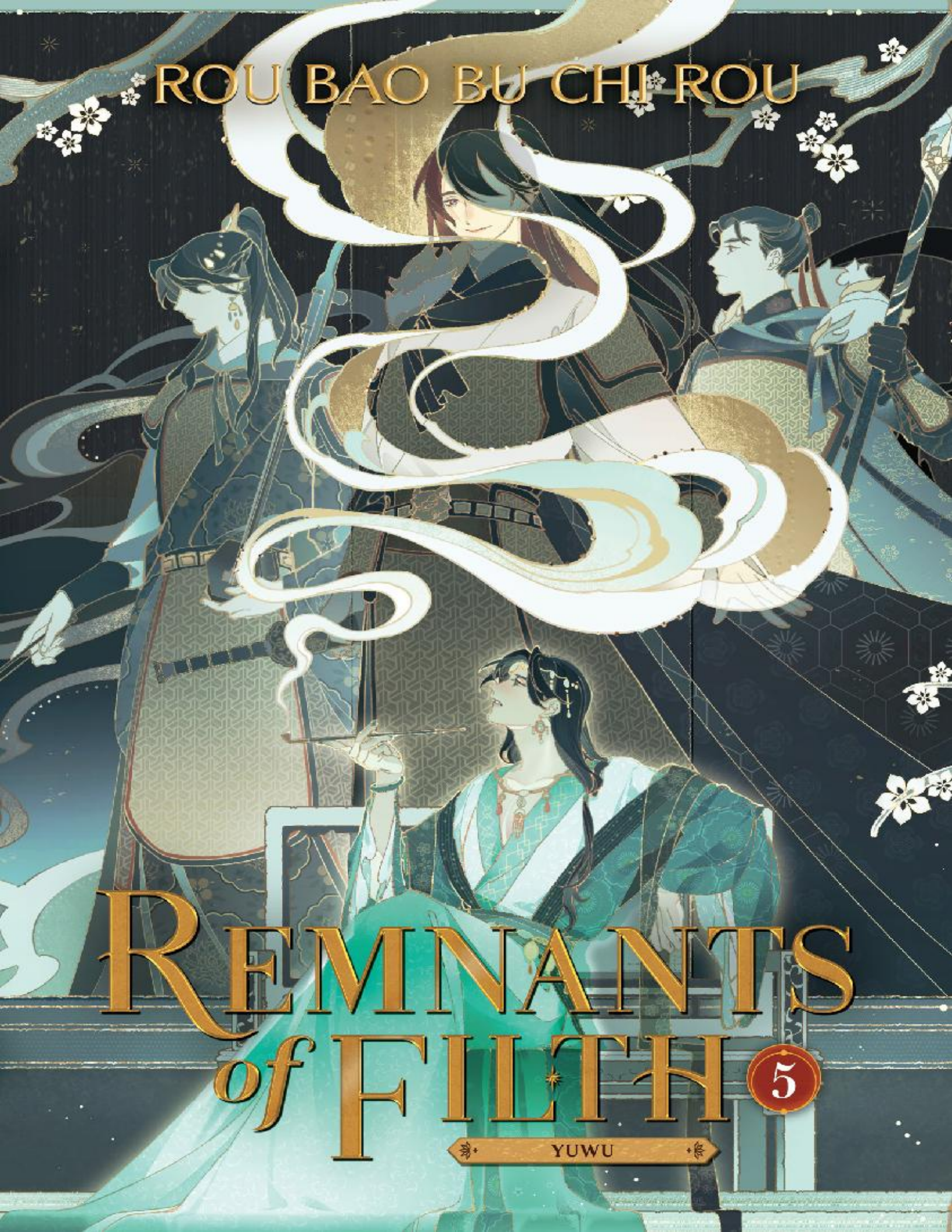
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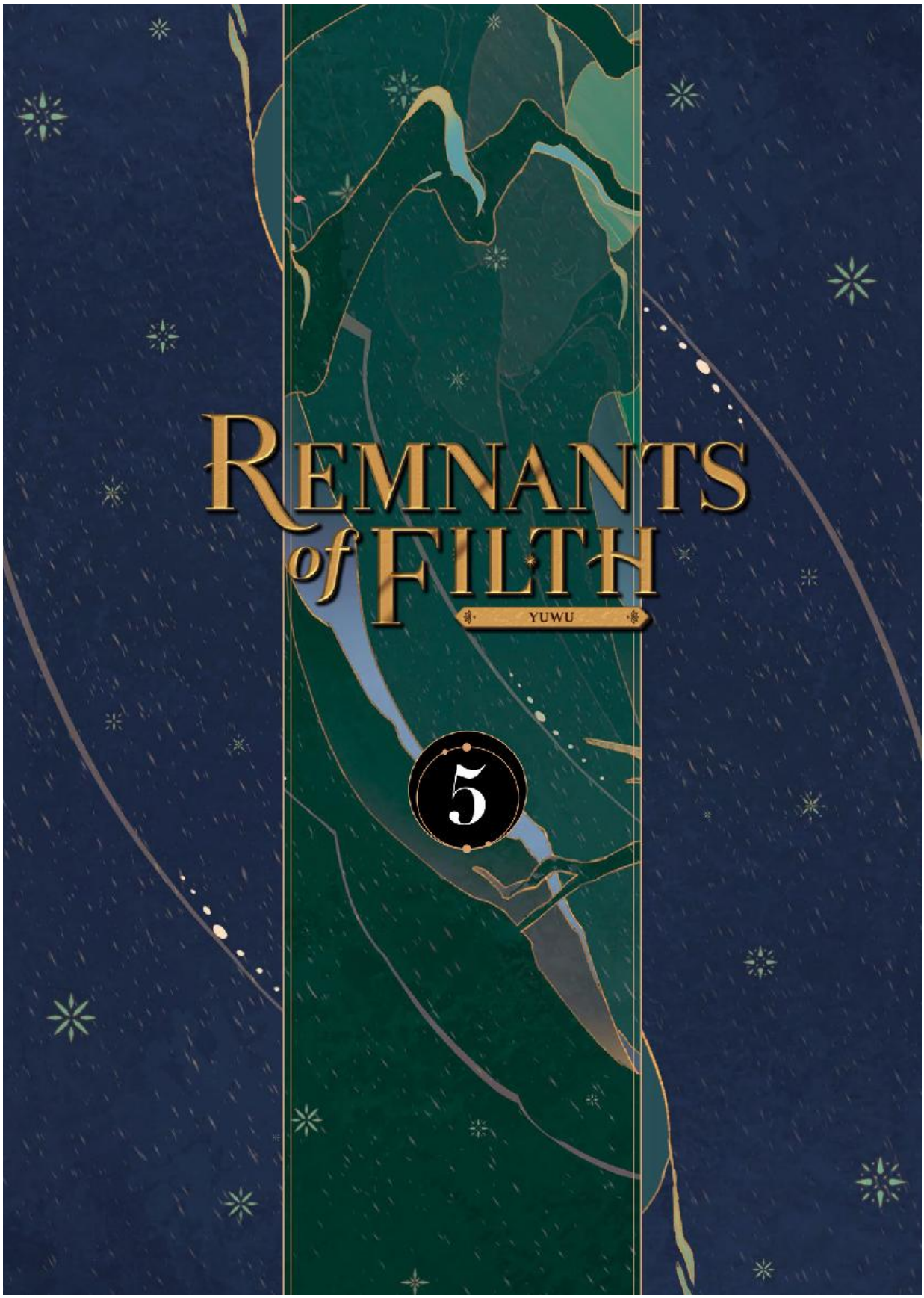
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REMNANTS OF FILTH:
YUWU VOL. 5

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-68579-762-1
Printed in Canada
First Printing: November 2024
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Chapter 131:
I Love You

MO XI'S HEAD snapped up.

Gu Mang's lashes fluttered in the dim lamplight as he slowly opened his eyes, a deep oceanic blue. He stared blankly at Mo Xi. Not yet fully conscious, expression guided only by instinct, his gaunt face was relaxed and soft. He looked unbearably gentle, just the way Gu Mang-gege ought to look.

"My royal highness… Why are you crying…?"

His voice was a murmured sigh. But before Mo Xi had the chance to respond, Gu Mang's dreamlike expression disappeared as wakefulness returned. Mo Xi watched as each remnant emotion of his past—shock, fear, attachment, cruelty, guilt—rushed up like the tide, washing away the tenderness in his eyes.

Gu Mang sat up, yanking his hand from Mo Xi's palms, his true face hidden behind the mask of viciousness he had long grown used to wearing. "Mo Xi, are you out of your mind?! Who let you come to the Asura Room for me? Don't you know—"

Mo Xi's sudden embrace cut him off. The man's warm and sturdy arms wrapped securely around him, as if bringing him out of a frozen lake and into the longed-for warmth of spring.

His blue eyes widened. He was so shocked he forgot what he wanted to say. Mo Xi held him tightly, chin pressed to the top of Gu Mang's head, kissing and caressing his hair. "I already know everything."

At that single, simple sentence, Gu Mang's body tensed. He squirmed, trying to push Mo Xi away. But before he could put his weight into it, he felt a shudder through the man holding him. "Shixiong, don't say any more foolish words, or do any more foolish things," Mo Xi rasped.

Gu Mang was at a loss. All these years, he thought, he had disguised himself very well. He'd built up a hard outer shell so everyone would only see his decisive cruelty and brutal hostility. Yet he'd woken up to discover

this mask had been shattered. Before him lay the person he wanted to protect more than anyone, eyes scarlet-rimmed, hand reaching toward his soft, helpless heart.

He refuted it on instinct. “Mo Xi—you only know the half of it. And what does my business have to do with you? I told you a long time ago that we’re not the same kind of person. I’m really… I’m really…”

Mo Xi cupped a hand around the back of his head, his voice muddled and slightly nasal. “You’re really not like that.”

Gu Mang stared at him, speechless. It was as if a layer of ice stood between them with Mo Xi on the outside, trying to embrace Gu Mang trapped within. No matter how cold the dark ice was, Mo Xi would never back down. And so, little by little, the ice thawed. Little by little, it cracked.

“You really didn’t want to kill or fight. You never wanted to hurt me. You didn’t want to avenge yourself on anyone…”

Mo Xi’s voice was low. Earlier he had cried while Gu Mang slept; he was no longer willing to shed tears now that Gu Mang was awake. Gu Mang had suffered enough. He didn’t want to make this soft yet tenacious creature worry any more about him or hurt any more on his behalf.

“It’s been eight years, Gu Mang. It must have hurt… I’m sorry. I was the one who didn’t understand you.”

In his arms, Gu Mang’s trembling became more apparent with every word. At last, Gu Mang seemed to crumple under a great weight. He shuddered violently; Mo Xi could hear the low sobs trapped in his throat, could feel dampness at his chest.

“No… N-no…” Gu Mang frantically tried to shove him away. Mo Xi had only ever seen his Gu Mang-gege look brilliant and clever. This Gu-shixiong had been backed into a corner yet was still scrambling to lie just to push him away, just to protect him. He was so clumsy—clumsy to the point of stubbornness, clumsy to the point of pity. So clumsy Mo Xi’s whole heart, his whole body, throbbed with pain.

Gu Mang didn’t know what else he could make excuses for, what else he could offer up in sacrifice. He had always protected others; it was an instinct carved into his bones. Now, no longer able to do so, he was as

helpless as a blinded dragon with its claws torn away. He could only repeat, over and over, “It’s not like this… You don’t understand…”

Mo Xi took hold of his hand, the rims of his eyes red. “Must you keep pushing me away?”

Gu Mang froze.

“It’s been so many years, Shixiong. But do you know what hurt me the most? It wasn’t that you stabbed me or left me. It was that you turned into someone I didn’t recognize at all… Do you know how miserable I was? You wanted to protect me, you didn’t want to implicate me. I know. But I told you long ago—in this world, I have no one dear to me, except for you. When you protected me, why didn’t you think what would be cruelest to me? Did you think I would fear to suffer alongside you, or the criticism of others? What I fear is you never returning to my side, Gu Mang—I’m afraid of losing you!”

Mo Xi closed his eyes. He still held back his tears, but his lashes were wet.

“All these years…I’ve always treated you sincerely. I used to hope my sincerity would be enough to win me yours in return. But after going through so much, it no longer matters if you love me, if you’re willing to be with me… I only ask…”

He stroked Gu Mang’s hair, lowering his lashes as he pressed a kiss to Gu Mang’s temple, forcing down the tremor in his voice. “I only ask that you give me the chance to protect you, to stay by your side. I just want to take care of you,” he said hoarsely. “Will you really not allow me the smallest glimpse of truth? Will you not let me share the burden you carry on your shoulders, even the slightest bit? Gu Mang…I’m one of your comrades and brothers-in-arms, too. Would you rather leave me out in the cold, make me live on through pain worse than death?”

He spoke so genuinely, with such passion, but Gu Mang only felt a terrible agony.

It had been eight years. From the day Gu Mang decided to become a spy, he had planned Mo Xi’s future. They were so young back then, unacquainted with the suffering of love. Gu Mang had naively thought that, as long as he acted with decisive heartlessness, this young man would feel

that loving him was something that hurt too much. If it hurt, Mo Xi would let go. Sooner or later.

Gu Mang had waited. All this time, he had waited. He'd pricked Mo Xi until his hands ran with blood, stabbed Mo Xi until his body was covered with scars, but still Mo Xi never gave up on him.

All these years, he'd hoped Mo Xi would put aside their past love, hoped he could live a quiet life, marry a gentle and virtuous wife, and sire a brood of lively children. Sooner or later, time would wash away the unbridled passion of their reckless youth, leaving only faint ink stains. Such were the considerations he had made on Mo Xi's behalf.

But Gu Mang had made one grave mistake. In this world, love and the lack of it could change, but one's heart would forever be the same. And Mo Xi had never been a careless person. On the day he decided to confess his feelings to Gu Mang, what he gave to him wasn't his love. It was his heart.

His…

Gu Mang suddenly realized something was wrong. Where he was pressed against Mo Xi's chest, he could feel that Mo Xi's spiritual energy flow was weak, his spiritual core almost shattered.

Once more, those scenes from the Asura Room flashed through his mind. Mo Xi's face had been terrifyingly pale when he rescued him. Could it be…

Gu Mang jerked his head up. "How did you learn the truth?"

Mo Xi didn't respond.

"Did you go to Bat Island again? Did you use the Time Mirror?"

As Mo Xi looked down into Gu Mang's anxious face, into those uneasy and frightened blue eyes, a soft, sorrowful smile spread over his face. "Are you worried about me?" Before Gu Mang could answer, Mo Xi ducked to kiss his brow, as if terrified he might deny it. "I'm fine."

But Gu Mang's heart seemed to rend apart. A flood of guesses rushed into his mind like the tide, then retreated, leaving one clear answer in the sand. This time, Gu Mang didn't ask. Tears streamed down his soft cheeks as he mumbled, "It was the jade scrolls…"

His long lashes fluttered closed. Gu Mang tried to hold on, to push down his emotions, to say something to clearly demarcate the chasm between them.

But…

It had been eight years. He had committed every cruelty between life and death, but nothing could stop Mo Xi from chasing after him, from walking along this little path filled with thorns. He had left behind obstacles and dangerous hindrances, but none had halted this youth's dogged footsteps. His little shidi had still caught up to him. When he turned in the darkness, he found his beloved from eight years ago was no longer young. He was covered in dust, spattered in blood. The only thing that hadn't changed were those bright, obstinate black eyes.

The lover he had relinquished ran toward him, overtook him, and stood in the thicket of brambles, panting as he said—*Shixiong, Gu Mang, I've come to find you. Let's go home.*

That layer of ice shattered completely, bursting into gleaming motes of light. The man who had lain frozen and dormant beneath the ice was finally taken into his little shidi's arms.

Gu Mang could bear it no more. That bowstring strained to breaking for eight years finally snapped; he burst into sobs. "I'm sorry… I'm sorry…"

I was the one who looked down on your affection and misread your stubborn, immovable heart. I was the one who made rash choices in your stead and didn't ask which path you were willing to walk.

I was the one who disrespected your wishes, who mistook what you cared about most, and imposed my plans on your life.

I was the one who deceived you all along…who didn't give you the chance to walk with me…

It's been eight years. I've injured you, harmed you, estranged you, stabbed you. I've disappointed you in so many ways, I even nearly killed you—

Oh, why didn't you turn back, my little dummy, my princess, my highness? Why did you still risk devastation to uncover the truth, and then

rush to my side, covered in wounds? Why are you so, so silly?

"Mo Xi, I'm sorry…"

The hand caressing Gu Mang's hair stilled. Misunderstanding Gu Mang's intent, Mo Xi said, "Don't worry, I know what you've chosen, and I know what you've had to face, endure, and sacrifice… You don't need to apologize to me. In truth, as I told you long ago—if you really don't love me and don't want to be involved with me, I won't force it. As long as you come back…"

As he spoke, the rims of his eyes slowly reddened, his lips gently brushing Gu Mang's brow like the most devout prayer.

"As long as you're okay, as long as you let me stay by your side and give me a chance to share your burdens… Gu Mang, my dear shixiong, that would be enough for me."

At this point, he feared his embrace would make Gu Mang uncomfortable. He lowered his head and longingly pressed his jaw once more to Gu Mang's forehead, preparing to let go.

Strong arms suddenly wrapped around him. Gu Mang clutched at him like a beast separated from its pack finally returning, his throat already choked with sobs. This lost and wandering man, who had been alone too long, endured too much, and swallowed a secret in silence for eight years, at long last broke down weeping in his lover's arms. Pressing his forehead to Mo Xi's heart, he howled with grief, as if to shed all his heartache and suffering with these tears.

Gu Mang hugged Mo Xi tight around the waist, the slender ends of his eyes pitifully wet and red. Between sobs, he spoke the words that had festered in his heart all this time, the words that had nearly rotted to their core: "It hurt too much… Mo Xi… It really hurt too much…"

He clung to Mo Xi like a drowning man clinging to a piece of driftwood, despairing and exhausted. Mo Xi's heart clenched; he caressed Gu Mang's hair, murmuring in a low voice, "I know, I know…"

"I did everything alone… I had to do everything alone… All those years, I couldn't say a word about how I really felt to the people around me. I killed the citizens and cultivators of my own nation, killed my comrades… It hurt so much… Mo Xi…"

“I know… I know…” Mo Xi’s voice was tearful.

“I thought I would go insane… Like there was a knife stabbing at me, every day and every night, every hour, every moment, but I had to say, *stab me harder, stab me more*…” Gu Mang trembled, closing his eyes in anguish. “I didn’t want to kill anyone… I wanted to come back to Chonghua… I wish Lu Zhanxing were still alive, I wish none of it had ever happened…”

“I know. Go ahead and say it—you’ll feel better once you say it. I’m here with you, I’ll stay by your side…”

But Gu Mang had stopped speaking; he stared ahead with blue eyes washed clear by tears. After a long while, he murmured, voice low, “I didn’t want to leave you either…”

“I—” Mo Xi had intended to continue comforting him, to keep saying *I know, I understand*, but this shocked him to stillness. For a long moment, neither of them broke the silence. There was only the pounding of their hearts*: Thump, thump, thump.*.. So urgent and fast. As if some truth that had been buried deep within for many years was straining to break out.

Gu Mang was an indomitable person, always emanating a courage that reassured others. But right now, he was timid, like someone who had long wallowed in poverty cautiously reaching out to take hold of a precious gift he thought he would never receive.

His voice was a whisper. “I didn’t want to lie to you… I didn’t want you to leave. I—I never wanted…”

There was a pause before Gu Mang continued:

“I don’t want to see you leave. I don’t want to see you with anyone else.”

Mo Xi’s hand paused. His refined features blanched, then flushed. It was obvious he had given up hope; he had accepted the idea of them being no more than martial brothers. As long he could see Gu Mang healthy, happy, and carefree, it was fine. He wouldn’t force him into anything, impose on him, or otherwise bother him again.

But Gu Mang’s words seemed to reignite the flame he had just extinguished within himself.

Gu Mang closed his eyes. Years of falsehood shattered with his next words. “Mo Xi, I do love you…”

Mo Xi’s heart seemed to freeze over, its beating stalled. He gazed at the man in front of him, at that tearful and wan, yet genuine face. Even in the sweetest dreams he ever had, he didn’t dare dream that Gu Mang might sincerely speak these words.

“I love you, I’ve always loved you… I’m sorry, I was selfish in the past. I was the one who didn’t think about what you wanted or what you were afraid of. I wanted to protect you in my own way, but I didn’t know… didn’t know…”

Didn’t know you would stumble after me to make up for eight years of lost time, that you would forsake the best of your youth trying to bring me back. I didn’t know you were sure of your choice at such a young age—that you would devote a lifetime to one person.

I didn’t know that even after enduring so much, you would still walk beside me, even into hell.

He fell silent. Mo Xi, teary-eyed himself, tilted Gu Mang’s face upward. He reached out to wipe the tear tracks off Gu Mang’s cheek, little by little. “Didn’t know I loved you too?” he murmured. “That I could love you for so long?”

Gu Mang lowered his lashes. “I’m sorry… I lied to you for so many years.”

Mo Xi was quiet.

“Do you still want me?”

“Dummy… Since the first time I confessed to you, I said once I choose someone, it’s for a lifetime.”

Though Mo Xi’s heart was trembling, he strove to appear calm. He had warned himself not to cry in front of Gu Mang anymore. Those tear-damp phoenix eyes curved, an endlessly brilliant, endlessly sorrowful smile unfolding over his features. “I’ll give you everything I promised you,” he said. “It’s only been eight years. We still have long lives ahead of us—how could I not want you?”

After enduring countless unwilling lies, after experiencing so many sorrows, joys, separations, and reunions, the two of them stared at each other, blankly and foolishly. Their chance to reconcile and reunite had finally come, so neither continued to weep. But both understood—though their lives were long, they would never recover the health that once belonged to them. They couldn’t set aside their cares and speak only of happy things, either.

Destiny and circumstance had long tormented them, leaving them covered in wounds. But when their misty eyes met, slowly and through tears, still they gathered all the courage and warmth in their hearts and offered it up to each other as the softest smile.

A pair of trapped beasts, both carpeted with scars, could finally hold one another and nestle into each other, with no distance or misunderstanding between them. The layer of ice had melted. They could finally take warmth from each other and share each other’s pain.

From now on, whether in the endless depths of winter or the eternal warmth of spring, they would be together, never again to part.

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Chapter 132:
Is Candy Sweeter, or Am I?

SLOWLY, Gu Mang recovered.

This situation was complex; neither the emperor nor Mo Xi could yet clear Gu Mang's name. Despite his upset, Mo Xi saw the emperor's reasoning—Gu Mang wished to reform Chonghua. If his identity was revealed so suddenly, all his sacrifice and effort would be in vain. Both the emperor and Gu Mang hoped Mo Xi would keep this secret.

But Mo Xi had never been good at deceiving others. It wasn't that he was an unreliable secret keeper; on the contrary, he was strict, self-disciplined, and entirely capable of keeping his mouth sealed. What he couldn't keep sealed were his feelings for Gu Mang. Even if he said nothing and did his best to restrain himself in front of others, it wasn't long before everyone in Xihe Manor noticed the sea change in Mo Xi's treatment of him. Previously, his handsome face would be flat and expressionless, as if Gu Mang owed him five hundred thousand golden cowries and was long overdue on his debt. But now, even the tone in which he spoke to him was warm, his low voice pleasing to the ear without the slightest whiff of temper.

While Gu Mang was still recovering, an oblivious cook dispatched him to the kitchens to help stoke the fire. This wasn't taxing work, just a little dirty. Gu Mang used to chop firewood and stoke the fires all the time; he followed the cook's orders without complaint.

But when Mo Xi returned to the manor and heard Gu Mang had been pulled to work on the stove, he went straight to the kitchens and hauled Gu Mang away amid the servants' terrified fluster.

"My, my lord…" The cook stammered in fear.

"What's this nonsense?"

"I just saw he was idle with nothing to do," the cook said. "I-I told him to come help out."

“He’s still sick. What is he supposed to help with?” He turned to Gu Mang. “Go lie back down and go to sleep.”

The cook stared, flabbergasted.

Nor were the kitchen servants the only ones who experienced such an epiphany. The servant in charge of maintaining Xihe Manor’s treasures also had something to say—

“Stoking the fire? That’s nothing—I’ll tell you something even more unbelievable. The other day, when Gu Mang was trying to catch Fandou, he was running after the dog so fast he accidentally toppled that glazed plum blossom vase. That’s the one! The most expensive vase in the entire manor, smashed to smithereens.”

The listening crowd gasped in shock. Another servant asked anxiously, “And then? What happened? Did you report it to the lord?”

The first servant slapped his thigh. “How could I not? That vase is worth as much as a five-courtyard estate on the north side of the city—how could I possibly not report it? I went right away to tell the lord what happened.”

“Good heavens… That’s the lord’s favorite vase. He must have been furious…”

“He was indeed. Do you know what he said?”

His audience shook their heads like so many rattle drums.

The servant mimicked Mo Xi’s stern tone: “Who placed that vase there? What if it struck someone? Is he hurt?”

The crowd gaped at him. After several beats of silence, one of the servants let out an undignified exclamation: “Wooow.”

No one could say precisely what had transpired between Mo Xi and Gu Mang, but the change was obvious to anyone with working eyes. Fortunately, the staff of Xihe Manor were a loyal bunch, and not much given to scheming. Under Li Wei’s disciplined management, no word of this alteration spread outside the manor for the moment.

“Say, Housekeeper Li, what’s with the lord? Whatever happened, a traitor is a traitor; what would the emperor think if he knew? What would others think…”

Li Wei stood in the open-air corridor, hands tucked into his sleeves, and watched the ripples on the pool within the courtyard. “Do you trust the lord to conduct himself honorably?” he asked.

“Of course I do. Is there anyone more righteous in all of Chonghua?”

“Then we’ll trust him and not ask questions we shouldn’t. He has a reason for his actions. We’re his own people; there’s only one thing for us to do.”

“Which is?”

“Keep our mouths shut,” said Li Wei.

Under such attentive care, Gu Mang’s wounds healed quickly. The faewolf blood with which he was tempered made his body sturdier than before. But the painful fact remained that although Jiang Fuli could heal the wounds on his body, he could do nothing to stop the deterioration of the Time Mirror’s effect. Those memories flashed back by the shangao slowly disappeared from Gu Mang’s mind like flowing sand.

Gu Mang knew if he didn’t say certain things now, he wouldn’t get a chance to in the future. The lucidity he’d been granted was no more than a beautiful illusion, an act of pity by the heavens.

He asked Mo Xi for paper and brush. When Mo Xi was there, he spoke with him, and when Mo Xi was not, he sat alone, setting down the things he remembered in writing. Every day when he woke, he read what he wrote the day before; if there was anything he had forgotten, he would memorize it anew.

He was doing his utmost to maintain this small measure of clarity.

Once, when Gu Mang was sleeping, Mo Xi glanced at some of the expensive sheaves of paper he had stacked by his pillow. The most eye-catching passage told of their first meeting at the academy. In it, Gu Mang had written: *He sat beneath a tree, eating a zongzi. He looked up and glanced at me, but unfortunately, his face was a complete blank. Ah, he probably had no impression of me at all.*

He would have kept reading, but Gu Mang stirred beside him. Opening his eyes to find Mo Xi flipping through his papers, he sat up and snatched them from his hands. “Hey hey hey! No peeking, no peeking.”

Mo Xi was momentarily stunned. “You mind?”

“How embarrassing would it be if you saw what I wrote?” Gu Mang gathered the stack into his arms. “If you want to read it, at least wait until I’ve forgotten everything again. By then, I’ll be blissfully ignorant, with no idea what embarrassment is.”

Mo Xi’s gaze darkened.

“Aiya—all right all right, it’s not like I’ll forget everything so quickly for sure, is it?” Gu Mang added. “Look how I’m going over my memories every day. I might still remember all this in a year—or wait, no, in ten or twenty years, right?”

Mo Xi didn’t respond or expose Gu Mang’s lies. He merely lifted a hand and cupped the back of Gu Mang’s neck, bringing their foreheads together. After a moment, he took hold of Gu Mang’s right hand, caressing his lightly callused index finger. There were so many devoted sweet nothings he could say, so many oaths of eternal love he could voice, yet Xihe-jun only gently touched Gu Mang’s fingers. He only murmured, “You got ink on your hands and didn’t even wash it off.” He sighed. “Ah, you…”

Gu Mang laughed. “Who’s the shixiong here—me or you? Who’s the fiercer one—me or you? What’re you scolding *me* for?”

“Of course you’re fiercer.” Mo Xi smiled bitterly. “Even now I can’t imagine how you did it. You knew everything, but you still said nothing and went with Zhou He to be a subject for black magic experiments.”

“What else could I do? Sometimes, you have no other option—just like you, and His Imperial Majesty too. Honestly, don’t hate His Imperial Majesty too much for what he did. Those in high positions have little choice. He could have easily found an opportunity to kill me if he really had no kindness or desire for justice in his heart. But he never did.”

Mo Xi didn’t respond. Eventually he lowered his lashes, then wrapped his hands around Gu Mang’s fingers once more. His broad palms brushed the sapphire ring Gu Mang wore. After hearing Murong Lian was the one who gave it to him, Mo Xi was genuinely confused as to why. But Gu Mang’s health had been so poor back then, and Mo Xi hadn’t pressed him. He couldn’t suppress a slight frown as he noticed it again now.

Catching the direction of Mo Xi's gaze, Gu Mang's lashes fluttered imperceptibly. Mo Xi noted every minuscule change in his expression, but he didn't point it out. Gu Mang had lived with the Murong family and been involved with Murong Lian for more than twenty years. Some things, after suffering the twists and turns of time, were too difficult to summarize. Mo Xi didn't pry, only asking, "Do you want me to return this ring for you? Or do you want to go yourself?"

Gu Mang was quiet. He stretched his fingers, examining that glittering sapphire ring. After thinking a while, he replied, "I'll pay a visit to Wangshu Manor myself."

There was a brief silence before Mo Xi replied, "All right."

Gu Mang could hear the stifled discontent in those words. He smiled up at him. "Does it make you unhappy?"

"No." Mo Xi paused. "But you need to remember to wear a mask and put on a cloak." His brows lowered in a scowl. "There is no shortage of people in Chonghua who would make things difficult for you."

"I'll be careful," said Gu Mang.

The water clock on the table dripped; it was getting late.

"I'll go back to the study," said Mo Xi. "I still have some files to look over. You should get some rest. If anything happens, come get me. No one will stop you."

Gu Mang smiled. "You shouldn't take too much care of me. I'm still a traitor, aren't I? Show some restraint in front of others."

Mo Xi's heart stuttered and began to ache. It stuttered because he had waited so many years—from his youth till today, when he was over thirty—to receive Gu Mang's true and sincere acknowledgment. It ached because they had been through too much, and many new and beautiful things were already worn away. They were like two patched pieces of cloth; whole, but changed beyond recognition.

His grim mood didn't go unnoticed. "Mo Xi," he said, playful.

"Hm?"

Gu Mang leaned over the pillows, grinning up at him. "When you're done with your records, come back here and sleep with me. Don't go to the

side room. If word gets out that you had me sleeping in the master bedroom for so long while you slept outside like a servant, people will say I’m bullying you.”

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Mo Xi looked down, pursing his lips in silence. Moonlight spilled over the tips of his ears, revealing a faint redness. He quietly said, “You should get some rest.”

Gu Mang’s delight became more pronounced. He lowered his lashes, reaching out of the blankets to pat his little shidi’s cheek. “Good boy.”

Mo Xi didn’t say a word.

“Too bad Shixiong has no candy to reward you with.”

Mo Xi glanced up at him, then suddenly bent and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. He didn’t dare kiss him too deeply—an ember was buried within his heart, and Gu Mang’s sighs would fan it into a sea of flames. So Mo Xi only kissed him once before sitting up. “I’m going back.”

Gu Mang touched his own lips. “Was it sweet?” When Mo Xi didn’t answer, he asked again, without an ounce of shame, “Heh heh, what’s sweeter—candy or me?”

Mo Xi wasn’t good with words of affection. When he was genuinely angered, some truly caustic statements could burst out of him. But when he was struck by a gentle and enamored mood, he became clumsy and meek. He didn’t know how to respond to Gu Mang’s teasing questions. Instead he lifted a hand, extending two fingers to gently prod at Gu Mang’s forehead.

Gu Mang kicked at the blankets on the bed. “Say *something*. I swear you keep getting stuffier and stuffier—I won’t be surprised if you stuff yourself to death!”

For a moment, Mo Xi was silent. Then he did say something: “In that case… Goodnight.”

Gu Mang stared at him, incredulous.

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Chapter 133:
Fourteen Years of First Love

GU MANG PREPARED TO GO to Wangshu Manor to return the ring the next night. To remain inconspicuous, he put on a hooded cloak and a silver mask. Plenty of cultivators dressed like this throughout the cultivation realm, so he wouldn't stand out too much.

Before he left, Mo Xi gave him a jade token. Interest piqued, Gu Mang fidgeted with it as he asked: "What's this for?"

"It marks the holder as a special ambassador of Xihe Manor. Otherwise, what would you say when confronted by Wangshu Manor's guards?"

Gu Mang paused and smiled. "I wasn't planning to go through the front door. I'll just vault over the wall."

Mo Xi took him seriously. Yanking Gu Mang close, he said, stern, "Don't mess around—you know Murong Lian's temper. You'll get yourself into trouble again."

Gu Mang was caught off guard, and the force of Mo Xi's pull brought them nearly nose to nose. Mo Xi lowered his head, his breath brushing Gu Mang's temples. "Hold still and don't move," he said, voice low.

He bent down and fastened the jade token at Gu Mang's waist. Mo Xi gave the task his full attention, his profile sharp and defined as he turned, lashes fluttering like two soft little fans casting shadows over the bridge of his nose. Mo Xi's skin was smooth and bright; as Gu Mang stared at him at such close quarters, he saw no blemishes, like jade porcelain that had soaked in the waters of a clear spring.

"There." Mo Xi straightened up. "Just show this and say you're one of my messengers. They won't dare stop you."

Gu Mang smiled as he stroked the tassel on the token. Without warning, he reached up to take hold of Mo Xi's jaw, pressing close and kissing him. "Okay, I'll just say I'm yours."

Lost for words, Mo Xi gazed back at him. As he looked at his shixiong standing before him like the sweetest dream of his life, he suddenly couldn't bear to let him go. "Why don't I come with you? I'll wait for you outside Wangshu Manor."

Gu Mang blinked. "Why? Even with the token, you're still worried Murong Lian'll act out?"

Mo Xi tilted his head. "…I was just saying."

Slow realization stole over Gu Mang. "Is it that you don't want to be apart from your Gu Mang-gege?" he asked, grinning.

Mo Xi pressed his lips together. It wasn't that he didn't want to—it was that he was afraid. He was scared to part with Gu Mang. He knew Gu Mang's lucidity had a time limit, and his past separations with Gu Mang had been far too long and painful. Even a man as strong as Mo Xi felt dread at the thought of Gu Mang leaving his line of sight.

Gu Mang reached up to pat Mo Xi's head as an elder brother would. Mo Xi's heart seemed to melt; it had been so long since Gu Mang had treated him like this.

"I want to do this by myself. But you needn't worry—I'll be back before you know it." A gentle smile shaped Gu Mang's slender eyes once more. "When has your Gu Mang-gege ever lied to you?"

Absolutely outrageous. Mo Xi replied, "All the time."

Gu Mang burst into helpless laughter. "Ha ha ha, okay, fair point. Don't glare at me like that—I was wrong, you can punish me."

"What kind of punishment could you bear in your current state?" Mo Xi murmured.

Even now, an innate desire for dominance and possession showed in his eyes, subtle but endlessly deep. Under such a gaze, Gu Mang felt his chest heat and his heart soften. His little shidi was just like this; he might look restrained, but his love was ferocious. Inside that body, with those long legs and that narrow waist, desire blazed like molten rock.

Others only saw Mo Xi's ascetic and self-disciplined facade; they never knew these parts of him, but Gu Mang had thoroughly experienced it all. Mo Xi was impetuous, rough, even ravenous. Yet Gu Mang didn't

dislike these things. Though no man of steel would like the idea of being invaded, Gu Mang could vividly feel that Mo Xi was pouring all his love into him, emptying all his desires onto him. The good, the bad, the rational, the irrational—this young man new to love had given him everything.

In a flash, his young man was no longer young; his shidi became his Xihe-jun. Everything had changed, save for those eyes gazing at him, as sincere and deep as the first time he revealed his love and desire. Somehow, this first love of theirs had already gone on fourteen years.

In the end, Gu Mang went alone to Wangshu Manor. He showed the jade token and smoothly bypassed the guards at the gate, stepping beneath the arching eaves of the open-air corridor.

Wangshu Manor was as winding and convoluted as he remembered, infused with Murong Lian's particular brand of indolence. Couches, soft mats, little fans, and tea tables littered the courtyards as far as the eye could see, and a birdcage swung beneath the eaves, occupied by a canary sunning itself on its perch. It was just like its owner, lazy and unsociable.

Gu Mang made his request for an audience with the guards in the inner courtyard, then went to wait in the middle pavilion of Wangshu Manor, where there was a spacious garden.

He remembered this garden. When he was little, there was a swing here; toy bamboo horses had been leaned against the wall, and chicks, ducklings, and bunnies left to roam. All children loved gardens like these, and Murong Lian was no exception. From time to time, he came to sit on the swing and chase the animals around until the whole yard was in a state of chaos. When the young master wasn't there, little slaves like Gu Mang would also run around the courtyard, using the excuse of feeding the chicks to steal a fleeting half-day of leisure.

One day, Gu Mang had been playing on the swing when there was no one else around. As he rocked himself, he had quite by accident drifted off to sleep. Murong Lian entered the garden and instantly blew up, shoving Gu Mang off the swing.

"Dirty slave! You *dare* touch my things!" Murong Lian fumed. "Attendants! I don't want this swing anymore! Tear it down! Throw it in a

pit and burn it as firewood! It's too damn dirty! Such bad luck!"

Murong Lian's expression that day resurfaced in Gu Mang's memories. His gestures were so exaggeratedly threatening. As if Gu Mang was poisonous, and if anything he touched so much as brushed Murong Lian, he would die from the toxin.

Gu Mang had still been dreaming when someone pushed him off the swing; only after a confused minute did he recover and crawl upright. When he managed to sit up and turn his head, Murong Lian froze in the middle of his malicious shouting. "You—you…"

At the sight of Murong Lian's face, bone-white, Gu Mang lifted a hand to his forehead and came away with a palmful of blood. The little boy had no idea what do to; he stared blankly for a few moments, then burst into tears.

As soon as he started crying, Murong Lian panicked. "Y-y-you deserved it! You lowly little slave!" he snapped. But as he saw more and more blood dripping from Gu Mang's forehead, he grew afraid. After a few slow steps back, he turned tail and ran.

Gu Mang sat on the ground and wept. He had never seen so much blood, and his forehead hurt so much. Tears streamed down his small face, but he didn't move.

It was nearly dark when a woman ran in from the courtyard gate.

"A-Mang, what happened? What happened? Aiya, how did you end up like this? Let Auntie Lin take a look…"

Auntie Lin was the ugliest female servant in Wangshu Manor. Her face had been destroyed by fire, her features as ruined as a vengeful ghost's. Everyone in the residence mocked her and the children feared her; it was only Gu Mang with whom she was close.

Gu Mang had been orphaned young. He didn't know what a mother's love felt like. In those days, Auntie Lin would often secretly slip him desserts, sew him clothes, or teach him to read a few words. From those tiny acts of care, he did his best to learn the feeling of having a family.

So he burst into even more terrified wailing as soon he saw her. "Auntie Ni! Auntie Ni! Am I going to die?!" He was young and still lisped

his words; he couldn’t pronounce *Lin*, so he called her *Auntie Ni*.

“Hush, hush, don’t cry. You’re fine, Auntie Lin’s taken a look; you’re just fine. A-Mang, be good, Auntie Lin will take you to get it bandaged.”

The ugly woman scooped the filthy child from the dirt. Even after so many years, Gu Mang remembered her warmth and her scent. Back then, he had thought: if he had a mother, his mama’s embrace would surely feel like this. He never thought Auntie Lin was ugly. Her eyes were clear and gentle; he’d always felt her disfigured features were like a mask she couldn’t remove, and beneath it was a peerlessly beautiful face.

He reached out and wrapped his chubby arms around her neck. “Auntie Ni…”

Auntie Lin carried the child to Wangshu Manor’s resident healer. He bled the whole way, crying piteously and refusing to let the healer tend to him. Auntie Lin crouched down to tease him and distract him from the pain. “Say Auntie Lin.”

Mouth wobbling, Gu Mang said tearfully, “Auntie Ni.”

“Auntie—*Lin*—” She patiently elongated the sound for him to repeat it.

“Auntie—Ni—” he said clumsily.

The healer was a middle-aged man who looked down on this dirty child and this ugly woman. He patched Gu Mang up, but not without mocking them cruelly. “What’s the point of teaching this stupid child? Either way, he’ll just grow up to be Murong-gongzi’s servant.”

Auntie Lin’s eyelids twitched, as if suppressing some unspeakable emotion. But she was accustomed to humiliation. Given her status, fighting to get the last word was completely useless. She merely smiled at the healer. Then, turning her head, she patted Gu Mang’s tearstained little face. “Come, say Auntie Lin.”

Even now, Gu Mang vaguely remembered the feeling of wanting to stand up for himself and Auntie Lin. He strained so hard his face turned red, ignoring the pain in his head as he turned and said with painstaking care, “A-Auntie Ni…”

The healer was tidying the gauze nearby and started guffawing without reservation. At his shrill laughter, Gu Mang stared emptily, then burst into another wave of upset tears. He was truthfully trying very hard; he wanted to pronounce the tones right, to properly say *Auntie Lin*, but his childish tongue couldn't do it. He was ashamed; he really was just a dumb kid, and this cultivator wasn't wrong at all—he was merely fit to be a servant.

Only Auntie Lin would look at him, her eyes shining with tenderness. "Very good, A-Mang will say it right in the future. There now, don't be sad."

"An ugly woman comforting a filthy babe, ha ha ha—"

Was Auntie Lin ugly? No—in Gu Mang's heart, Auntie Lin was the most beautiful woman in the world. She had phoenix eyes of boundless softness and arms warm as an endless spring. He was secretly determined to grow up quickly, fix his clumsy tongue, and properly call her by name—but he never got the chance. Auntie Lin passed when he was only four.

Before she left the world, she shared with Gu Mang a secret. This became the reason he stayed in Wangshu Manor, without defying or quarreling with Murong Lian, for nearly twenty years.

That woman, she said—

"Special Envoy."

A voice called out from behind; Gu Mang came back to his senses. He blinked away those memories, letting the wetness in the corners of his eyes subside, then turned.

The head housekeeper of Wangshu Manor stood beside the corridor. "The lord invites you in."

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Chapter 134:
Murong Lian's Childhood

MURONG LIAN WAS IN a little courtyard of the inner pavilion, smoking as he sprawled upon a summer bed. Several slim books were placed at its head, as well as a small jug of wine. As Gu Mang came in, he took another long drag of ephemera before slowly exhaling smoke. "You may withdraw," he said to his servants.

Murmuring acquiescence, the attendants left. Only Murong Lian and Gu Mang remained in the courtyard.

Murong Lian lay indolently back against the bamboo bed and looked at Gu Mang sidelong. He tapped ash out of the bowl, then put the pipe back in his mouth. "Fireball is so interesting," he sneered. "Sending a special envoy to my manor, in a mask and hood no less. Tell me, what happened?"

"It's me," said Gu Mang.

The instant he heard Gu Mang's voice, Murong Lian choked on the smoke he'd inhaled and broke into a flurry of coughs. Shock, anxiety, hatred, hesitance—even some unidentifiable emotion—flashed across his face in turn. "You? Why did you come here dressed like a special envoy? Are you looking for a beating?"

Only a small handful of people in Chonghua knew Gu Mang had recovered his memories; he obviously couldn't show too much clarity of mind in front of Murong Lian. But he was the spy who had buried himself in the Liao Kingdom for five years; deception came as easily as breathing. With feigned sluggishness, he said, "Don't get angry. I've come to return this."

Murong Lian blinked.

"The lord said I can't accept favors from other people whenever I want. So I came to return this ring to you." He took off that sapphire-blue ring, placing it in Murong Lian's palm. "Thank you for giving it to me. But it's useless. I don't like it."

Murong Lian appeared deeply insulted; he nearly jumped to his feet. “Do you know what you’re saying?”

“There are a couple hundred rings like this in Xihe Manor. If you like shiny little hoops, I can give you more.”

“Bullshit! Can his rings compare to this one?!” Murong Lian’s fingers clenched around the ring, furious. “This one is—”

Gu Mang peacefully waited for him to speak.

“This, this is—this is…” But whatever Murong Lian wanted to say seemed trapped in his throat. Eyes flashing with unsteady light, he viciously bit out, “Forget it. Why should I talk about this with you? The ring was only lent in the first place; it wasn’t ever a gift. Even if you didn’t come to return it, I’d have gone to Xihe Manor in a few days to get it back. Don’t think so highly of yourself!” As he spoke, Murong Lian slid the ring back onto his own thumb.

Gu Mang sighed. He hadn’t really expected Murong Lian would so easily reveal the secrets of the ring to him, but he had figured he’d try his luck. The real reason he came to Wangshu Manor was because he wanted to take a look around. Within this residence were some relics he still cherished.

Taking in Gu Mang’s silence, Murong Lian stared at him and asked: “What is it? Did Zhou He turn you stupid? Say something.”

“I’m not stupid,” Gu Mang responded haltingly. Pausing, he shot a glance at Murong Lian’s pipe. “Only people who smoke that stuff are stupid.”

“You—!”

“You’re getting angry again. You’re always angry,” said Gu Mang. “Okay, I’m a good wolf, I won’t make you unhappy. I gave the ring back, so I’m leaving now. Goodbye.”

Murong Lian’s slender eyes narrowed as he watched Gu Mang turn and walk away. As Gu Mang reached the arching moon gate of the courtyard, Murong Lian suddenly spoke up, sinister. “Hold it.”

He stalked over to Gu Mang and paced a circle around him, his tone clipped. “Gu Mang. I seem to remember that, before you went to Bat

Island…you'd already recovered quite a lot of your mind."

That slender, long-handled pipe extended toward Gu Mang, its curved stem finding Gu Mang's chin and tilting it up. Murong Lian narrowed his peach-blossom eyes further. "You don't actually think you're still a wolf, do you now?"

Gu Mang said nothing.

"Let me think… Could it be you're here today to mourn that Auntie Ni of yours?"

Gu Mang stilled, then turned his head. "Who's that?"

Murong Lian made no sound, his expression menacing as he watched Gu Mang. Gu Mang watched him back. A gust of wind blew through the courtyard, and Gu Mang's hooded cape billowed. Murong Lian asked, "You really don't remember who she is?"

Gu Mang shook his head.

"Don't lie to me. You were with me so long; you should have some idea of what happens when you try to deceive me."

"I don't have any idea. I don't understand what you're saying." Gu Mang lifted a hand to knock away the pipe Murong Lian had pressed beneath his chin, wrinkling his nose. "That smells awful. Why did you ever start liking this stuff?"

After a few sneezes, Gu Mang turned and left the courtyard without a backward glance. His face was calm, but his heart was racing. Why would Murong Lian suddenly mention Auntie Ni? Those who knew he had recovered his memories could be counted on one hand. Did someone speak to Murong Lian? Or could it be that Murong Lian had his own suspicions, and took the opportunity to test them…

Heart pounding like a drum, Gu Mang strode out of Wangshu Manor. He stood outside the gates and pondered a while but was no further enlightened. At last he heaved a sigh and decided to let it go. Yet instead of returning to Xihe Manor, he took a detour to the Jiang residence.

Gu Mang couldn't stand to see Murong Lian such a slave to his addiction. His old master was an undisciplined person; his father had died when he was very young, and after his mother, Madam Zhao, passed away,

there was no longer anyone to keep him in check. And he still hadn't taken a wife, even now. He had every appearance of a wealthy and rich master of a noble family on the outside, but in truth, he was a wastrel bachelor with no one to look after him. Nothing good would come of letting Murong Lian keep on like this. Thus, while his mind was still clear, Gu Mang thought he'd go to Medicine Master Jiang to ask for something that would help Murong Lian quit.

When he arrived at Jiang Manor, however, Gu Mang found that the one writing prescriptions in the hall was not Jiang Fuli, but Su Yurou.

The medicine master's wife wore her ever-present veiled bamboo hat, hiding that face rumors named a calamitous beauty. She sent off a patient, then looked up to see Gu Mang, still masked and hooded, stepping in. "Has the gentleman come for a diagnosis?" she asked lightly.

"To pick up medicine. Is Medicine Master Jiang here?"

"This humble one's husband left a few days back to roam the lands. If your illness is not too complex, perhaps I can provide a diagnosis."

"Why's he gone traveling again…?" Gu Mang bowed his head in thought. Jiang Fuli's whereabouts were always indeterminate. Of the three hundred sixty-five days each year, a good half of them he spent outside his manor. It was said affection put a hero's ambition in its grave, but this saying didn't seem to apply to Jiang Fuli—the man had married a peerless beauty, only to leave her alone at home.

Though on second thought, Gu Mang himself was scarcely any better. An unparalleled beauty like Mo Xi had been right in front of him all this time, yet he'd left him unattended more than ten years.

"Is my husband required to write the prescription?" asked Su Yurou.

"Not exactly." Gu Mang sighed. "If I might trouble the madam, I just wanted to ask if there're any methods to quit smoking drugs like ephemera."

"…The gentleman is from Wangshu Manor?"

"More or less."

"Then I must ask you to leave."

Gu Mang's eyes widened behind his mask. "Wh-why?"

“You must know Wangshu-jun himself has no desire to quit this drug. Medicine is but a tool; the heart is still the master. If he wholeheartedly wants to smoke, any medicine will be useless, no matter how potent. Why would I ruin my Medicine Master Manor’s reputation?”

Gu Mang opened his mouth to argue, but Madam Su did have a point. If Murong Lian wanted to smoke, who could stop him? Despite his deep anxiety, he could do nothing but sigh, thank Su Yurou, and leave Jiang Manor empty-handed.

In truth, Gu Mang’s feelings about Murong Lian were complicated. He thoroughly disagreed with many of Murong Lian’s methods on the one hand. But on the other, he understood Murong Lian’s mindset more than most, and couldn’t help but pity him.

Murong Lian’s father died many years ago. His mother, Madam Zhao, had hoped to raise her son in the image of the former Wangshu-jun. She wholly strangled Murong Lian’s own natural talents, insisting he walk a path in all ways identical to his father. Gu Mang remembered quite clearly how Murong Lian had loved illusion techniques when he was younger. He’d sat often in the courtyards, filling the pavilion with colorful butterflies and swaying seas of vivid blossoms—Madam Zhao, however, wouldn’t stand for this.

“What good are illusion techniques? In the army, you can only ever be reinforcement! Useless! Your father was skilled in musical techniques—you’re his child, so music cultivation must be your focus. Don’t even think of wasting your time on anything else!”

“Look at Mo Xi! He’s as competent as his father, Fuling-jun—is he more talented than you, or just more determined? Have you no self-awareness?”

“Murong Lian! Buy one more of these illusion technique scrolls, I dare you. See if I don’t rip them all to pieces!”

After days upon days of beatings and scoldings, those butterflies and flowers slowly disappeared from Wangshu Manor. In his mother’s eyes, the things Murong Lian found beautiful were trifles unworthy of mention, shamefully inadequate.

While Madam Zhao lived, the words most frequently heard in the estate were: “Murong Lian, follow your father’s example. Don’t bring shame to Wangshu Manor.”

Murong Lian lived in the mold of his father. No one cared that he was a different person entirely. The moment he did something outside the confines of this compartment, they cruelly cut his flesh away, ignoring any pain he felt at the mutilation of his dreams.

When he failed to meet expectations, he was scolded viciously.

“Why are you messing around? Go cultivate properly!”

“How can you be tired? You’ve barely done anything! Murong Lian, what progress have you made?!”

“You have the best of everything—if you can’t make something of yourself, no one will make excuses for you!”

Gu Mang remembered how Murong Lian had struggled violently at first, shouting back at his mother as he ran out of the residence in tears—

“But I *like* illusion techniques! I *don’t* like the qin! Why are you forcing me? I don’t want to be Murong Xuan’s son anymore! Whoever wants to take my place can go ahead!”

These words earned him Madam Zhao’s explosive rage—it marked the first and only time Murong Lian received a brutal beating. The tiny boy had been battered bloody, crying as he lay in bed, sobs hitching in his throat… He had looked unbelievably pitiable.

Gu Mang had watched him grow up. He watched as he was treated like a diseased plum tree: his hobbies stripped away, his nature discarded, and his fate distorted, pruned into a simulacrum of his father. The young Murong Lian’s resistance had faded into silent endurance, and from endurance into numbness.

That child who had once sat in the sunlit pavilion delighting in his courtyard full of butterflies was never seen again. In his place came the flowing notes of the guqin in the practice room, and the melody of the jade flute filling the imperial city; in the bitter cold and cruel heat, amid the mournful beating of raindrops on banana leaves, lingering on in the same way, day in and day out.

Others said the qin sounded beautiful. Gu Mang alone knew it didn’t. Within the music made by those precious instruments, Murong Lian was mourning his butterflies and flowers. He played their funeral dirge again and again.

In the end, Murong Lian had become a bent and twisted thing.

When Gu Mang had forgotten everything, he felt nothing amiss with this Murong Lian who was constantly intoxicated by this narcotic drug. But after recovering his childhood memories in the Time Mirror, it troubled him. Others thought Murong Lian a man rotten to his core, but Gu Mang had served him practically since toddlerhood. He knew better than anyone that Murong Lian oughtn’t have wasted away like this.

Murong Lian’s personality, shaped by his childhood experiences, was vile. He had no qualms about playing dirty and deceiving his opponents if that was what it took to win. Like when he used that pair of slave siblings to gain Mo Xi’s sympathy for the sole purpose of seeing him whipped. Or when he leveraged Gu Mang, during the incident with the slave collar, to coerce Mo Xi into losing at the cultivation tournament.

His actions, despicable as they were, demonstrated one thing—Murong Lian liked to win. And how could he not? He had been berated and pressured since he was young; he was like a dog who’d grown used to being hit. At the sight of the stick, his teeth would chatter and his body would shake. Striving to stand at the top had become second nature; though his mother passed many years ago, this habit persisted.

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But what was ephemera? It was a drug smoked only by the weak-willed, those who lied to themselves and others. Anyone in their right mind knew a person became more or less useless upon touching a drug like this. Why would Murong Lian, a man with a violently competitive temperament, indulge in a drug that would rot one to the bone in the five years Gu Mang lived as a traitor?

And then there was the matter of the ring. Although its uses remained unclear, Gu Mang didn't feel it was something harmful. That ring emanated a strange aura; he was almost certain Murong Lian had put it on his finger in order to help him.

Murong Lian… Murong Lian…

What did he know, what was he hiding, what had he endured?

Gu Mang frowned deeply, but no matter how he turned it over in his mind, he couldn't figure it out. Instead, he felt the beginnings of a splitting headache. He had to leave it unanswered.

It was noon by the time he returned to Xihe Manor, just in time for lunch. Gu Mang entered the hall to find the table empty and the room deserted. Bewildered, he flagged down a servant entering the courtyard with a plateful of fruit and asked, "Jiejie, where's Xihe-jun?"

The servants of Xihe Manor hadn't previously treated Gu Mang nicely, but most had quickly adapted to the situation. In recent days, Mo Xi had shown Gu Mang such attentive care that even the blind would see it—how could the servants miss the implication? That servant girl flashed a clever smile. "Aiyo, why would Gu-xiansheng need to call me jiejie? Please just call me Xiao-Su."

Gu Mang was still reeling from this respectful new address when the girl set the plate down, wiped her hands, and smiled as she pointed. "The lord was sitting under the orange blossom tree in the back garden a bit ago. Look for him there first. If you can't find him, try the small kitchen."

"Small kitchen?" asked Gu Mang, alarmed.

"Yep."

"What's he doing *there*?"

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Chapter 135:
Peaceful Days

THE SMALL KITCHEN in Xihe Manor was built in a side courtyard, open to the air. An old banyan tree flourished within, extending its vibrant jade boughs over the yard.

There was no one else in the courtyard. When Gu Mang entered, all he saw was Mo Xi's back as he busied himself over the stovetop.

Mo Xi was no practiced cook, but a thick stack of books with titles like *Flavors of Huaiyang* and *Sichuan Recipes* lay on the table as if to give him strength in numbers. He had yet another cookbook in his hand, and was examining its contents with brows tightly knit, drumming his knuckles against the stovetop counter.

The sight amused Gu Mang to no end. This little shidi of his had a habit: he'd rap his knuckles against some nearby surface whenever confronted with a thorny problem. But the last time he'd seen Mo Xi thus vexed was on the eve of battle; he'd never expected to see Xihe-jun so troubled over cooking a meal.

"Two taels of cassava starch, a level spoonful of salt… Peel the shrimp and coat in starch…"

Mo Xi selected a shrimp from the basket. The fisherman had cleaned them; all Mo Xi needed to do was peel it, coat it in cassava starch, and throw it in the oil to fry.

But here the problem arose: Mo Xi did not know how to peel shrimp.

After reading the recipe multiple times and finding no tutorial, his brows drew lower still. A moment later, a faint red glow appeared at the tips of his fingers, spiritual energy flashing as his fingertips came together. With an audible crackle, the poor shrimp buckled under the weight of Xihe-jun's regard and instantly turned to dust.

Mo Xi stared wide-eyed, like a tabby who'd been swiped across the nose by his first mouse. "Huh?" Then a mumble: "I didn't even start the spell…"

Gu Mang couldn’t hold it in anymore. Leaning against the courtyard doors, he burst into side-splitting laughter behind Mo Xi. “You—” he cackled, “How could you use the Armor-Removal Technique on a helpless little shrimp?”

Mo Xi turned, embarrassment flitting across his peerless features. “How are you back already?”

Gu Mang bounded toward him, smiling as he wrapped his arms around Mo Xi’s slender waist and buried his face in his broad back. “I missed you, silly. I’ve come to watch the great battle between the beauty and the shrimp.”

Mo Xi was mortified. Sunlight spilled past the branches onto his face, illuminating the tips of his ears, flushed a soft pink. Gathering himself, he explained, “I had nothing to do today, and happened to see a fisherman passing by with a fresh catch. I didn’t go out just to buy it.” Mo Xi gently tried to pull free but realized Gu Mang had him locked in his grip. “Let go,” he said, turning his head.

Gu Mang refused, teasing him instead. “You know, I’ve always wanted to tell you something.”

An ominous pause. “What is it?”

Arms still looped around Mo Xi’s waist, Gu Mang looked up at him and smiled. “You’ve got such long legs.”

Mo Xi stared at him.

“And such a slender waist…with such broad shoulders.” Gu Mang sighed. “Someone like you would definitely be a headliner at Luomei Pavilion.”

Mo Xi was exasperated and amused at once. His ears were still red, but he had no witty retort. After more than a moment, all he managed were those same two words: “Let go.”

Gu Mang clung to him and pestered him until Mo Xi had no choice but to reach his starch-covered fingers toward Gu Mang’s face. Gu Mang finally danced away, laughing. He brought a chair over and flipped it around to sit, elbows propped on the backrest. The courtyard was quiet; the potatoes and rice steaming beneath their wooden lid smelled wonderful,

while the fat, speckled chickens left to roam the yard clucked as they strutted through the underbrush, pecking at insects.

He knew many things weighed on Mo Xi's mind. The two of them had finally bared their hearts to each other, yet the worry in Mo Xi's gaze only deepened with the passage of days. He worried that Gu Mang's memories would disappear, that his reputation would never be washed clean, that the black magic energy in his body would grow increasingly difficult to control… So many knives still hung in the air, pressed right against his heart. Mo Xi couldn't relax in the least; he'd only just obtained his dearest one, but they were surrounded by danger on every side.

Gu Mang would soon forget, but Mo Xi would remember. And remembering was always much more painful than forgetting.

He didn't know what he should do with his royal highness, or how to cajole his little shidi out of the anxious shadows that shrouded his heart. So he joked and teased. To be honest, Gu Mang was neither so shameless nor so good at saying sweet nothings. He and Mo Xi were the same—their first and only love had lasted fourteen years, and they shared the same inexperience and immaturity. But as long as he could cheer Mo Xi up, Gu Mang felt it wasn't so difficult to say those awfully forward things. A lifetime was only so long. There were many things he might never have a chance to voice if he didn't do so now.

"Princess, you're really pretty. Honestly, I never properly paid you this compliment before, but I've always thought so in my heart."

Mo Xi remained silent.

"I love you. I'm very happy when you're in my sight. Also very happy when you're in my arms. Happiest when you're in my bed."

Mo Xi dropped the bowl of starch with a clatter and turned to look at Gu Mang, helpless with embarrassment. "Are you doing this on purpose?"

Gu Mang smiled as he sprawled across the back of the chair, raising a hand. "On my honor—I meant every word."

Silent, Mo Xi lowered his head, washing his hands in the basin. Without looking up, he said, nonchalant, "Come here."

"What for?"

“Roll up my sleeves.”

Gu Mang sauntered up behind Mo Xi and craned his neck to see. “Aren’t your sleeves fine…*mngh*!”

Mo Xi knew Gu Mang had a habit of crying out when he was caught off guard, so he covered Gu Mang’s mouth as he yanked him forward. Shoved against the countertop, Gu Mang couldn’t make a sound. Mo Xi held him from behind, his broad and sturdy chest pressed against Gu Mang’s back.

It was the height of summer. Mo Xi’s robe was thin, and his unmistakable scent invaded Gu Mang’s senses, as though to ensnare him in an inescapable trap. Gu Mang’s blue eyes widened, as if he’d been scalded. He shivered minutely, and when Mo Xi’s hand slid up his neck, Gu Mang felt an answering prickle scuttle down his spine.

Mo Xi’s legs were very long indeed. When he stood behind Gu Mang, he could fold him entirely in his arms. Mo Xi didn’t loosen his hold for a moment; he stood just like this, pinning him in a tight embrace. Gu Mang’s knees seemed to go weak under that familiar heat and scent. His warm breath brushed against Mo Xi’s palm.

“Feel that?” Mo Xi bent down to nip his earlobe, voice low and husky. “Then don’t test me.”

With that, he let Gu Mang go.

Hand to his throat, Gu Mang broke into a fit of coughing before turning to look at Mo Xi. That contradictory man had already returned to his shrimp and cassava starch, lashes demurely lowered. Mo Xi had always been like this: he could endure every sort of provocation and knew exactly what lines should and shouldn’t be crossed. Of course he was fervent in his liaisons with Gu Mang, and the heat of desire was certainly stirring within him, but he knew Gu Mang was in no state for anything strenuous. He’d ever been strong-willed, and always took the precise measure of whatever he did. If he judged a situation overindulgent or under-appealing, no one could tempt him to it—not even Gu Mang himself.

Gu Mang found himself powerless. He sat meekly back in his chair, leaning forward to watch Mo Xi work. Studying Mo Xi’s back, his heart, an

organ he thought forever destroyed by suffering, gradually welled with nectar. Sweetness rose from his shattered chest.

He knew he'd barely recovered and couldn't handle any intense dalliance, but he and Mo Xi thought differently. Unlike his mind, Gu Mang didn't much care about his body. After all, it was already a wreck. He merely wanted to offer up all his flesh and blood to his royal highness while he was lucid enough to express his love.

But why wouldn't his princess accept it? Alas, this man cared too much about this broken body of his, wound through with black magic. Mo Xi's ardent love was so strong and apparent, while Mo Xi's restraint was so genuine and unyielding. His attitude inevitably gave Gu Mang some beautiful fantasies that his damaged flesh was somehow still precious and salvageable. That there would come a day when his beloved would bring him ashore, and they would enjoy that carefree companionship they had dreamed of in their youth.

After toiling all morning and into the afternoon, Mo Xi finally presented the fruits of his labor. There was a dish of crispy fried shrimp, one of sweet-and-sour fish, a pot of evergreen soup, and of course, the only dish he was confident of—the crispy goose roasted over lychee wood. Gu Mang leaned over the stone table, watching his Mo-shidi bring the plates over. The rice had been keeping warm in the pot, and with a lift of the wooden lid, the scent of rice and potatoes filled the courtyard.

"The shrimp are a little charred, the sweet-and-sour fish is a little sour, and the crispy roast goose isn't as good as yours." Mo Xi ladled two bowls of soup. The tender, jade-green leaves lent their bright color to the bowl, floating alongside three perfectly round and succulent fish balls. "If you don't like it, we can go out to eat."

"Stop that, I'm starving. Even if you fed me coal, I'd eat it without complaint." Gu Mang took up the bamboo chopsticks and picked out a fish ball. It was light and bouncy, and the hot and savory soup burst into his mouth at the first bite. "Mm, delicious! I didn't know you were so good at this."

"I bought these from the Zhang Ji stall in the eastern market."

"…Oh."

“They used to be your favorite… Perhaps you’ve forgotten.”

Inwardly, Gu Mang wailed; no matter how he tried, he couldn’t get around the fact that his memories were slowly but surely disappearing. He usually strove to hide all traces of this from Mo Xi, but he’d slipped up with this little fish ball. His errant compliment only worsened Mo Xi’s mood. “Nope, nope,” Gu Mang hurriedly amended. “I meant the soup. You’re very skilled.”

Mo Xi stirred the plain broth with a porcelain spoon and said nothing.

Gu Mang sampled the other dishes. It had to be said that Mo Xi truly had no talent in the kitchen, but he’d at least been so focused on his task that he hadn’t made any major mistakes. Even if the flavors weren’t amazing, all of it was edible. Gu Mang heaped on the praise. “The fish *is* sour, but it goes really well with rice!”

“The shrimp is a little blackened, but it’s quite crispy.”

“This roast goose is definitely better than mine.”

Honestly speaking, there were two kinds of delicacies: real examples of culinary skill, and the food Gu Mang was presently eating. Because he loved this man, Gu Mang could still find all the highlights that made up for his beloved’s lack of grace in the kitchen.

It came down to one thing: “Everything you make is just the best.”

These compliments left Mo Xi abashed. Turning away, he cleared his throat and said, “I’ll cook for you every day if you want… I’m sure to get better with practice.”

Gu Mang smiled. “Next time we can do it together. I could teach you a thing or two. Look at me, look at me, there’re two words written on my face.”

Mo Xi stared at him. “What?”

Gu Mang pointed at his forehead and said in all seriousness, “Cook. Book.”

Lowering his lashes, Mo Xi smiled and cupped a hand around the back of Gu Mang’s head, pressing a kiss to his brow. “One’s missing.”

This time, it was Gu Mang’s turn to be confused. “What?”

Mo Xi watched him, eyes dark and adoring. “Mine,” he murmured.

Gu Mang’s heartbeat quickened. He stared into those puppy-like eyes, thinking, *Aiya, why do all the girls in Chonghua think my princess isn’t romantic?* His Mo-shidi *was* very reserved, but when reserved people spoke such sincere words of love, they were more moving than any clever flirtation.

After lunch, they worked together in the courtyard to tidy the bowls and chopsticks. Mo Xi had ordered all the servants away. The courtyard held only himself and Gu Mang, accompanied by one massive tree and a few chickens. Their food and clothing were simple; Mo Xi wanted nothing more than a life like this.

When the last bowl was rinsed clean, Gu Mang stretched. Mo Xi stepped over and wrapped his arms around him.

“What should we do next?” Gu Mang leaned back into him, speaking into the crook of his neck.

Mo Xi gave the question some thought. In the past, they had often pondered what they should do next. For example, next, they had to make camp; next, they were to temper weapons; next, they needed to hastily clean up so no one noticed their latest tryst. They’d always been rushing about.

But today, when Gu Mang reflexively asked this question, Mo Xi thought it over and felt that there was nothing more precious than their current peace. He lowered his head to kiss Gu Mang’s hair. “Yes. There’s something very important I need you to do.”

“What’s that?”

“Bask in the sun with me.”

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Chapter 136:
Dragon Boat Festival

TIME PASSED QUICKLY. In the blink of an eye, the Dragon Boat Festival[1] was upon them.

Regardless of how hard Gu Mang tried, his memories slipped from his grasp like flowing sand. Some things he would remember very clearly one day, but when Mo Xi mentioned them again the next, he would find Gu Mang had already lost the recollection.

Mo Xi was left anguished. Every time he saw Gu Mang sitting in the study, rereading that thick stack of paper by the light of his small lamp, his heart ached sharply. Though he hadn't read those pages, he knew they held everything Gu Mang didn't want to forget; Gu Mang read the stack through from beginning to end every day. He was doing all he could, but he still couldn't keep his hold on the past they shared.

Other than this, there were some reassuring signs. Gu Mang's body was gradually recovering, his mind was still mostly clear, and the black magic qi within him showed no indication of breaking free for the time being. If nothing else, they could enjoy a moment of peace.

A few days before the Dragon Boat Festival, the emperor sent someone to Xihe Manor with a secret missive. When the letter arrived, Mo Xi and Gu Mang were sharing a pot of green plum wine in the courtyard. Mo Xi opened the letter and skimmed it. "…His Imperial Majesty has written to you."

Gu Mang held a round little plum between glossy, red lips. He pointed at himself in shock. "To me?"

"See for yourself."

Gu Mang sucked the plum into his mouth, his right cheek puffing out adorably. He lowered his lashes as he read. At length, plum still in his mouth, he uttered one barely intelligible "Oh."

After his confrontation with Mo Xi, the emperor had fallen ill. He had not seen Gu Mang, either because he was indeed too unwell, or because he had no idea how to face him—what could he say? He had offered Gu Mang up to the gallows of black magic experimentation, while Gu Mang had never forsaken the promise he made. The emperor's shame was palpable.

Gu Mang's blue eyes were rueful. "He's inviting me to pay my respects at Warrior Soul Mountain on the day of the Dragon Boat Festival."

"I saw." Mo Xi paused. "Will you go?"

"No."

"You don't want to see him?"

"I already know what he'll say. Both of us acted for our own goals, but if he sees me, he'll make a whole production of it, and I'll have to play along and shed some tears as well." He picked out another green plum from the bamboo basket nearby, popping it into his mouth and mumbling, "Other than heaping up a pile of misery, nothing would change."

Mo Xi was silent. He knew the pain in Gu Mang's heart—in truth, Gu Mang despised being known as a traitor. He'd hated it when he didn't have his memories, and he hated it now even more.

Not long ago, there had been a sudden torrential rainstorm, lightning flashing and thunder rumbling. Gu Mang was still sleeping in the master bedroom, but that night, he shrugged on a thin robe and ran through the rain to the side bedroom, burrowing into Mo Xi's arms.

Mo Xi had been fast asleep, and was jolted awake by a wet and shivering body suddenly diving into his blankets. He saw Gu Mang, face bone-white, trembling as he pressed up against his chest. Stunned and anxious, Mo Xi asked him—*What's wrong? Does it hurt anywhere?*

Gu Mang shook his head. He was freezing to the touch, his lips turning blue. *I dreamed there were ghosts after me.* This lone wolf clung to Mo Xi, curling up in his warm embrace. *They were chasing me… Mo Xi, they wanted me dead.*

He always looked as if he were unafraid of anything. But that night, amid the furious thunder and miserable downpour, caught between dreams

and waking, he was honest and fragile.

In the present, Gu Mang, chewing on a plum, grew discomfited under Mo Xi's stare. He looked back. "What?"

Mo Xi paused. "I'm sorry I still couldn't clear your name. If you want to pay your respects at Warrior Soul Mountain, I can also—"

"I won't go." Gu Mang interrupted him.

Mo Xi fell silent.

"However you cut it, I'm the one who killed those people; I'm the one who took those cities. I have innocent blood on my hands. Eight years ago, when my hands were clean, I went and said farewell to my brothers. I don't want to go there."

When Mo Xi looked up, his eyes were filled with pain. "You stained your hands protecting them; you didn't do it willingly."

"Others won't think so. Whoever killed those people should pay with their life; what alternative could there be? Many have hated me for five, maybe eight years—their sons, husbands, or fathers died by my hand. Not a day goes by that they don't wish to see me brought to justice, to pay for my crimes with blood. If you suddenly tell them, *No, Gu Mang had no choice; he shouldn't be a prisoner but a hero*—do you think they would believe it?"

Gu Mang's voice was light as a pale wine warmed to the perfect temperature. "Mo Xi, have you never thought how those people would collapse if you took away this pillar of hatred and vengeance? How could they forgive me on the strength of a single explanation, a single truth… Hating someone is simple; letting go is hard. We both came up on the battlefields, so I know you understand. I won't go to Warrior Soul Mountain. No matter who comes with me—you, or the emperor—I won't set foot there again."

He lowered his head as he spoke, glancing toward that distant mountain. His mouth was still filled with the sweet fragrance of plum, but every swallow was bitter. He sighed. "In the eyes of the living, my reputation has been fouled beyond recovery. But, as long as I don't go to Warrior Soul Mountain, in the hearts of my dead brothers, I will at least still be a man with a clean heart and a clear conscience. That is enough."

In the end, they refused the emperor’s invitation.

Yet they didn’t celebrate a quiet Dragon Boat Festival by themselves in Xihe Manor. The day before the festival, they received a second invitation.

“Who is it this time?”

“Jiang Yexue,” Mo Xi replied. “It’s an invitation to go to his house and make zongzi.”

“Oh?” Gu Mang was taken aback, his eyes widening. “For you?”

“For both of us.”

Gu Mang smiled. “He doesn’t look down on me for being evil?”

“Did you forget?” Mo Xi rolled up Jiang Yexue’s letter and tapped Gu Mang on the forehead. “It was he who helped me repair the jade scrolls; he saw how I reacted. In his eyes, you’re no longer a traitor. He’s always been wise, so even if no one’s explained the whole story to him, I suspect he’s figured it out.”

Gu Mang was silent.

Mo Xi patted his head. “Let’s go—it’s been a while since you’ve gotten to go out and play. Do you miss Jiang-xiong?”

He nodded.

“And I’m sure Jiang-xiong misses General Gu. Specifically that little madman who played ‘Song of Courtship’ without a care at his wedding. He’d be happy if you came.”

Gu Mang lowered his soft and slender eyes, as if the boulder he’d placed over the past had shifted slightly, revealing the hurt hidden silent beneath. Mo Xi watched as the ends of Gu Mang’s eyes reddened.

Jiang Yexue’s residence lay in a secluded corner at the north end of the city. It was precisely the courtyard Mo Xi had gifted him when he’d first gotten married. Many years had passed since then; Jiang Yexue was now a grand elder of the academy who drew a considerable salary. But he had always been a frugal and sentimental man, and he’d never moved.

As the Dragon Boat Festival approached, merchants selling realgar, incense pouches, and sweet sedge leaves for warding off evil filled the streets in a noisy bustle. To avoid prying eyes, Mo Xi and Gu Mang traveled by carriage.

Upon arriving at Jiang Manor, they found themselves shocked. They'd expected Jiang Yexue to be alone, but even from a distance, they could hear the bright laughter of two youngsters—

The first was a young man. "I'm not a demon. Sprinkling realgar wine on me won't do anything."

An even more childish voice answered, bursting into a peal of giggles—a little girl, perhaps seven or eight years old. "Then sprinkle some on me," she chirped. "I want to see if I'm a demon."

Mo Xi and Gu Mang turned the corner and saw that the little courtyard was already festooned with bunches of mugwort and bulrush, and dragon boat lanterns hung from the eaves. Of the two making merry in the yard, the young man wore white robes trimmed in gold with a golden clasp fastening his braid and a jeweled circlet of beads at his brow. A plum-blossom sachet made from colorful brocade swung at his waist—this was of course none other than Yue Chenqing.

The little girl wore a five-poisons robe embroidered with centipedes, snakes, scorpions, geckos, and toads to ward off evil. Her shoulders were adorned with suppression seal ornaments made from colorful thread, and she was waving a little paper kite in the shape of a centipede. At the moment, Yue Chenqing was tracing the shape of *wang*—meaning king—on her forehead with realgar wine: three horizontal strokes joined by a vertical stroke in the middle.

She turned her head at the sound of their footsteps, and a smile bloomed on her little face. "Aiya! Da-gege!"

It was Changfeng-jun's heart-mad daughter. Gu Mang hadn't expected to run into these two at Jiang Yexue's house and found himself somewhat helpless. "Little Lan-er… What are you doing here?"

"Xiansheng let me come. I've been living in Xiansheng's house recently." Lan-er was shy as usual, but seemed much more cheerful than when they'd last met. She wriggled out of Yue Chenqing's grasp and

hopped over to Gu Mang, timid and excited as a bunny. “Xiansheng said Da-gege would come celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival with us. I thought he was just saying it, but you’re actually here!”

Yue Chenqing also seemed to have expected them, smiling as he nodded. “Xihe-jun, Gu…um…” He didn’t know how to address Gu Mang. Calling his name directly was unquestionably rude, yet calling him *General Gu* would be an imperial offense. On the other hand, if he were to say something like *Gu Mang-dage*, it’d be the same as declaring he was of Mo Xi’s generation. After a moment of thought, he smiled and said, “Gu-shishu.”[2]

Astonished, Mo Xi asked, “You’ve come to Jiang-xiong’s to celebrate today too?”

“Yep.”

“Your father…”

“Ah, forget it. I wanted Dage to come home for the Dragon Boat Festival, but I barely mentioned it before my dad cursed me out. He told me not to get—” Yue Chenqing shot a glance toward the inner courtyard and lowered his voice to a whisper. “He told me not to get mixed up with *shady people*.” He hastily continued, “Xihe-jun, don’t take offense—that’s just how my papa is. His health has been worse recently, so he’s always in a temper and suspicious of everyone. He doesn’t even spare *me* from his awful cursing. Bofu and I talked it over; when things quiet down a little, we’ll take him to Huntian Cave in the old fiefdom to recuperate. Once he’s feeling better, he’ll be way more pleasant to talk to.”

“You’re finally willing to acknowledge this dage of yours?”

Yue Chenqing scratched his head in embarrassment. “Jiang-dage i-is a great person. He’s good to me and Fourth Uncle. Even though the Yue Clan treats him like this, he’s never said anything bad about us. Before, I didn’t think for myself and treated him badly too. That was my mistake.”

Gu Mang had been listening to Yue Chenqing’s explanation as he crouched to play with little Lan-er. At this, he turned to smile. “I’m sure he’s happy you’re willing to acknowledge him and spend time with him. He’s told us it would be nice to have some family visit for special

occasions. If you—and Murong Chuyi—could come and keep him company more often, that'd be great."

At the mention of Murong Chuyi, Yue Chenqing's expression dimmed. "About Fourth Uncle… Well. Never mind Jiang-dage, he's barely talked to *me* recently. I heard everyone at home talking—it seems like Fourth Uncle wants to move out of Yue Manor and live on his own."

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Chapter 137: =
Deceased Wife's Memorial Tablet

"MURONG-XIANSHENG WANTS to move out of Yue Manor?" Gu Mang exclaimed. "Where would he go, all by his lonesome?"

"I don't know." Yue Chenqing looked down, distractedly smoothing his evil-repelling brocade sachet. He looked sorrowful, but beyond that, bone-weary.

Neither Mo Xi nor Gu Mang had ever seen such an expression on Yue Chenqing's face. This young man had chased after Murong Chuyi for so many years; he'd been disappointed, hurt, and dissatisfied, but never had he appeared so exhausted.

A person's heart was made of flesh. If it blazed with warmth for years without any reciprocation, there would inevitably come a day when it would expend itself and begin to cool. Although Jiang Yexue and Murong Chuyi were both his seniors and grandmaster artificers, Jiang Yexue treated him with a gentleness wholly different from Murong Chuyi's prickly attitude. Anyone might be swayed when presented with such a stark contrast.

"Fourth Uncle said long ago that the blood flowing in his veins was different from ours, that he's never seen us as family. The only reason he stayed in Chonghua was to repay my mother for the kindness of taking him in. Now that I've come of age, he probably feels that he's paid his debts, so…so he wants to leave."

Yue Chenqing's fingers twisted around the knots of the pouch. "I don't know where he'll go. Maybe he wants to roam the lands to look for his real family, or maybe he just thinks we're too annoying and wants to get farther away from us. I don't know how to persuade him. In any case, he… he's never been willing to listen to me…"

Mo Xi and Gu Mang exchanged a glance. There was really nothing to be said—what *could* they say, in any case? Yue Chenqing wasn't their

family, and Murong Chuyi even less so. It wasn't appropriate for outsiders to comment.

Just as the atmosphere was growing awkward, they heard the bead curtain tinkling behind them.

Lan-er was first to react. The little girl happily trotted over to greet the newcomer. "Xiansheng, Xiansheng!" she cried.

Everyone in the courtyard turned to see Jiang Yexue emerge from the inner hall in his wheelchair. He was wearing an indigo robe today, his ink-dark hair half-bound with a jade pin and falling around his shoulders. He patted little Lan-er's head with a smile.

"I'll push Xiansheng's wheelchair!" Lan-er chirruped.

"Go ahead."

The little girl slung the centipede-shaped kite over her shoulder and stepped behind Jiang Yexue to guide him into the yard.

Jiang Yexue raised his gentle eyes and smiled. "I was preparing evil-repelling sachets inside and didn't hear you come in; I've been a poor host. Mo-xiong, Gu-xiong, happy Dragon Boat Festival."

Now that all the guests had arrived, this little paved courtyard slowly filled with cheer. Jiang Yexue had no servants, so it fell to the guests to wash the reeds and stir the glutinous rice—but these small tasks were precisely what created the joy of domestic peace.

Yue Chenqing and Lan-er were young and nimble. The two of them, one tall and the other small, ran to and fro across the yard, adding firewood to the open-air stove, then hauling out great pails of well water to soak the leaves in.

Gu Mang sat perched on a little stool with his sleeves rolled up, stirring the glutinous rice. He shook his head at the youngsters' enthusiasm. "If they keep going like this, I'm afraid they'll use up all the water in the vat before noon."

"As they should." Jiang Yexue smiled. "We need to draw noon-water from the well during the Dragon Boat Festival; that's when yang energy is strongest. It's said the water stored at that time is best for warding off evil and repelling sickness. Didn't you swear by this before?"

Aiya, I forgot, thought Gu Mang.

But as he glanced at Mo Xi, washing the wrapping leaves by the stone counter some distance away, he silently rejoiced that Jiang Yexue had been the one to remind him of this. In a little while, he could go tell Mo Xi about it, giving him the impression that he remembered even these trivial details and thus soothing his feelings.

He turned back to Jiang Yexue and changed the subject. “Did you tell Yue Chenqing and the others about my situation?”

“Not quite,” Jiang Yexue said. “I just told him you have some secrets, Gu-xiong, that can’t be revealed. But I know you’re not a villain. If he can trust me, I hope he can trust you. Chenqing is a clever lad; we don’t need to spell it out for him.”

Gu Mang didn’t know what to say. In the end, he only looked downward. “Thank you.”

“What need is there for thanks between us?” Jiang Yexue sighed. “To be honest, I let you down. I wasn’t adamant in believing you either. I’m grateful you don’t blame me for that.”

He glanced toward the courtyard, as if looking through the years to see that simple wedding ceremony held there so many years ago. A pair of newlyweds, a handful of guests. Others had avoided them like the plague, but Gu Mang had acted like he wanted the whole world to know where he stood as he played “Song of Courtship” on his suona. In the courtyard filled with drifting scraps of colored paper, he had batted his lashes and smiled at Jiang Yexue.

“When others shunned me, you never turned your back on me,” said Jiang Yexue. “But I didn’t keep my faith in you. I’m the one who owes you a debt.”

Gu Mang scratched the back of his head in embarrassment. “Aiya, what’s there to owe between brothers?” Once again eager to change the subject, those blue eyes swept the courtyard and landed on little Lan-er. “Right, what happened with Lan-er?” he asked hastily. “Since when is she living with you?”

Jiang Yexue sighed. “You’re familiar with her situation. Lan-er’s spiritual core is exceptionally strong, almost on par with Xihe-jun’s. But her

body is too weak to bear such a formidable gift, so her power manifested as heart-madness instead. She's usually gentle and obedient, but as soon as the disease flares up, she becomes violent…"

"She lost control again?"

"Mn, she had another flare-up at the academy not long ago." Jiang Yexue looked at the little girl bustling about in the distance. "Even with the intervention of the academy elders, she injured a good few children. One of them was a distant nephew to the emperor."

Gu Mang said nothing.

"They were going to expel her from the academy and destroy her core," Jiang Yexue continued. "I couldn't bear to see it, so I vouched for her and took her in as my personal disciple. I'm not a healer, but I've dabbled in some healing arts. This heart-madness of hers is most sensitive to emotional blows; she can't handle other people's mockery." Jiang Yexue sighed. "The academy is filled with immature children who've been influenced by their parents. They all call her a monster. She won't improve if she stays there."

"You're right," Gu Mang said with a nod. "Little children are most easily influenced."

"I convinced Changfeng-jun to let his daughter stay at my manor. First, so I can teach her, and second, so I can help relieve some of the energy gathered in her unstable core. Third…" Jiang Yexue paused. "This house is deserted. She can at least live somewhere quiet and peaceful, where no one will bully her. It's good for her illness."

Gu Mang smiled. "You're absolutely right. You've mentioned three things—is there a fourth?"

Jiang Yexue tapped his forehead with his knuckles. After a long while, he smiled. "As for the fourth, she's very obedient and always takes the initiative to help me get around. It's like my wheelchair is suddenly automated."

As they smiled at each other, Mo Xi turned from the water basin. "The leaves are ready. Should I bring them over?"

"If you don't mind, Mo-xiong."

Making zongzi was a complicated task. The most popular style in the capital of Chonghua was pillow zongzi, using either the leaves of bamboo, wild rice, or rushes for the wrapping. There were many types of filling, both sweet and savory. Jiang Yexue had thoughtfully remembered everyone's preferences and gone to the market early in the morning to pick the freshest ingredients. By now, the meat and vegetables had been cleaned and cut, separated into little pots. The glutinous rice had also been prepared. Yue Chenqing rubbed his hands together in excitement. "Let's go! I want to make zongzi with meat filling!"

Lan-er hustled over with a little stool, raising her timid voice. "Then—then I want to make sweet ones."

"You don't want to stoke the fire at the stove anymore?" teased Yue Chenqing.

Lan-er's voice was quiet, but her manner was resolute. "Nope, firewood isn't fun. Making zongzi is a lot more fun…"

Jiang Yexue watched them banter as he sat with his cheek in his palm, smiling. After a moment, he seemed to remember something. "Eh?"

Gu Mang turned to look at him. "What is it?"

"I forgot the nine-colored thread. We'll need it for binding the zongzi later."

"Sit tight, Jiang-xiong—where is it? I'll get it for you."

Jiang Yexue smiled sheepishly. "Then I'll be troubling Gu-xiong. The thread is in the cupboard in the smaller hall, the second one on the left."

Gu Mang got up to go inside. Jiang Yexue's house was minimal in the way of decor. Very quickly, Gu Mang found that bundle of nine-colored silk thread Jiang Yexue had mentioned within the cabinet.

As he turned to leave, he caught sight of an enshrined memorial plaque out of the corner of his eye. That tablet was carved from cedar wood, painted black with a few simple words of white text:

For the deceased Lady Jiang, Qin Mujin

Gu Mang stopped in his tracks to stare at that spirit plaque. Qin Mujin was Jiang Yexue's late wife. Before they married, her family had fallen on hard times. Everyone else avoided them, but Jiang Yexue still

fulfilled the betrothal agreement. They'd been the picture of matrimonial bliss and should have looked forward to many happy years together. But Qin Mujin unexpectedly lost her life in battle soon after the wedding, while they were still in the honeymoon stage, full of mutual adoration.

Gu Mang hadn't known Madam Qin very long, and thus didn't have much impression of her. His clearest memory was of her bridal regalia when she got married—she had worn a set of splendid red robes, magnificent as the rosy sunset. Her veil had been light and fine, her face slightly visible in the dappled shadow behind it.

Other than that, he only remembered that this bride could drink. She looked delicate, but she drank all the guests who challenged her under the table, Gu Mang included. He'd been unsteady on his feet at the end of the wedding feast, and Mo Xi had to be the one to take him home—though he didn't let him return to his residence. Instead, he dragged Gu Mang to his own.

At the time, Mo Xi had still lived at the old Mo Manor, and that usurper uncle of his hadn't yet passed away. There were too many observers in the Mo residence, but, for some reason, Mo Xi was seized by recklessness that day. All those eyes and ears were just one wall away, but he insisted on pinning Gu Mang to the bed. Gu Mang had truly had too much to drink and kept an arm over his eyes the whole time. The sweet wine seemed to have softened his body and rendered his skin fever-hot, which only eroded Mo Xi's control faster.

Halfway through, a servant knocked on the door to ask if the young master needed a candle for his night reading session. Mo Xi's response was to extinguish all the candles in the room just to have his way with his shixiong—who didn't dare make so much as a squeak—all the more wantonly in the darkness.

Later that night, Gu Mang asked Mo Xi what kind of madness had overtaken him. After a long silence, Mo Xi told him: he was envious Jiang Yexue could marry the one he loved.

Gu Mang had been utterly sapped of strength at the time. Exasperated, he said, "There are so many brides in the world. Are you going to sigh every time you see one?"

Mo Xi was quiet for a while before answering. “To be honest, I thought the bride’s eyes under the veil looked a little like yours.”

Gu Mang nearly burst into laughter at the flimsy excuse Mo Xi found for his beastly behavior. “Her eyes look like mine? Yet why did I feel her nose looked like yours?”

“It didn’t at all.”

“You don’t think so? I think there was quite the resemblance. Her lips even resembled Murong Lian’s.”

“Absolutely not.”

“And the shape of her face looked like Murong Chuyi’s.”

At that, Mo Xi stopped with his retorts, as if he felt he shouldn’t be arguing with the shixiong he had bullied so terribly in his bed. But maybe because Gu Mang’s memories were fading, he couldn’t remember much more of their conversation. He didn’t know how Mo Xi would feel if he saw this memorial tablet now. They had been young in those days; they thought simply marrying the person one loved was enviable. They hadn’t imagined a tragedy like the separation of newlyweds. Perhaps it was true that no one could defeat their destiny.

Gu Mang sighed, bringing his hands together respectfully before Madam Qin’s memorial tablet. He and Jiang Yexue had been brothers, after all. If Qin Mujin were still alive, he would be calling her sister-in-law.

When he was done praying, he took another few looks at that plaque, hesitating over whether he should let Jiang Yexue know he’d like to light a stick of incense. Suddenly he felt that something was wrong. What, he couldn’t precisely say; when he had first glanced at the tablet, he hadn’t noticed anything. Only after studying it like this did he feel a faint wisp of concern—there was something on this tablet that didn’t quite belong.

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Chapter 138:
Exposed

GU MANG FROWNED as he ran his eyes carefully over that tablet.

The brushstrokes were neat, the wood high-quality, and the placement of each element exactly as it should be. It looked normal in every way, but his sense of unease persisted. And the longer he looked, the more insistent the feeling grew.

On his fifth careful examination, realization dawned. Gu Mang felt his heart skip a beat. He knew what was wrong with this tablet!

Dust.

There was a light layer of dust covering this meticulously carved memorial plaque, as if it had been a long time since anyone had cared for it. But when normal people paid their respects, wouldn't they dust it and wipe it often…?

Gu Mang stared blankly. At this moment, the soft susurration of a bamboo screen sounded from the doorway, and a gentle voice drifted over. "What are you looking at?"

A shock of cold sweat sprang up on Gu Mang's back. He whirled, unsure why his heart was pounding with such violent dread. He lifted the spool in his hand. "I…I was grabbing the nine-colored thread."

Jiang Yexue had stopped in the doorway. With the light at his back, he looked at Gu Mang and smiled. "Is it so hard to find? Was it tucked out of the way?"

Only then did Gu Mang's racing heart slow. He hadn't discovered anything that shocking, just a little odd. He didn't know why he suddenly felt as if his hair were standing on end. The sound of Jiang Yexue's voice had probably surprised him.

"No, not at all… I just saw Sister-in-Law's plaque and…wanted to pay my respects…"

Jiang Yexue gazed at him, eyes soft as willow catkins falling over a river in spring. “Many thanks,” he said warmly. “I’m sure Jin-er would be very happy you thought of her.”

Gu Mang licked his lips, silent.

He still called her *Jin-er*—one could hear the closeness he felt with his late wife even now. There was nothing so strange about this; Jiang Yexue was famously soft on the outside with an inner core of steel, never straying from his principles. Back then, he had persevered in marrying Qin Mujin, and later on, many years after Madam Qin passed, Jiang Yexue still entertained no thought of remarrying. One could assume he held steadfast to the idea of one person for a lifetime.

But comparing this kind of love with the dust Gu Mang had discovered moments ago… It was truly a strange juxtaposition…

Jiang Yexue had most likely been so busy lately that he had overlooked the cleaning.

“Little Lan-er’s already wrapped a handful of zongzi outside; she’s just waiting for the string. If you stay here chatting about old times with Jin-er, she’ll get anxious.” Jiang Yexue lifted the bamboo screen with a hand and smiled. “Let’s go.”

“Right.”

As soon as the rush leaves and glutinous rice were taken into hand, they revealed how the humble zongzi could fell the mightiest hero. Little Lan-er loved to help her papa; she was clever and her fingers nimble, so she wrapped hers quickest. Between Jiang Yexue and Gu Mang, one was an artificer and the other had been a Wangshu Manor slave. Though their zongzi couldn’t compare to Little Lan-er’s, they were adequate.

Yue Chenqing’s results were comical in comparison. Into one little rectangular zongzi, he had greedily shoved eight types of filling: ginkgo seeds, meat, sausage, chestnuts, salted egg yolks, kidney beans, chicken, and peanuts. It was stuffed to bursting. Jiang Yexue laughed at the sight. “Yours is definitely going to unravel.”

“It won’t! This is called eight treasures zongzi. Yue Manor makes them every year.”

“Only kitchen ladies know how to make eight treasures zongzi,” Jiang Yexue reminded him patiently. “You’re learning; maybe you should try a plain sweet zongzi.”

“I’m just giving it a go. Who knows, it might work.”

But in half a dozen attempts, either the wrapping leaf would break, or the meat filling would fall out. Finally and with much difficulty, Yue Chenqing produced a fat zongzi with rice leaking from all four corners.

“It’ll unravel the second you boil it. Yue-gege is too greedy,” Little Lan-er piped up. Everyone started laughing, while Yue Chenqing picked up his pillow-shaped zongzi in abject distress, rubbing his nose in embarrassment.

Once the water reached a boil, they scrambled to drop the first batch into the pot. The water for zongzi had to be watched carefully: they would come out best when cooked at a gentle simmer rather than a rolling boil.

While they waited for the first batch to cook, they wrapped the leftover rice into zongzi of all shapes and sizes. In addition to large, rectangular, pillow-shaped zongzi, they made long, skinny, bullhorn-shaped ones, dainty triangle-shaped ones—even some with the rice stuffed into bamboo tubes, the most traditional kind. But it was tedious work, and Yue Chenqing began to grow bored after a few. He glanced impatiently at the pot. “When will those be done?”

Jiang Yexue smiled. “Not anytime soon. Restless already?”

“…Not quite.”

“Why don’t you make some pretty linked zongzi and bring them home for Xiaojiu to try?”

Yue Chenqing’s eyes lit up when he heard this, but after a moment, he deflated. “Fourth Uncle is fighting with my dad; he’s been ignoring everyone recently. Better not.”

“They’re fighting again?” Jiang Yexue murmured, sighing. “That temper of his…” Shaking his head, he said no more.

They quickly used up the remaining rice, having made far more zongzi than they could eat. Jiang Yexue suggested, “Why don’t we share these with the neighbors? There’re quite a few lonely seniors around here.

Many of their children lost their lives in the war against the Liao Kingdom, and their health is poor. They don't treat themselves on holidays; since we have extras, we should give them some."

"Dage, you're such a good person," said Yue Chenqing.

"Xiansheng," Little Lan-er said timidly. "I want to go too. Can I go with Yue-gege?"

Jiang Yexue lined two bamboo baskets with clean cloth. He picked out some smaller, vegetarian zongzi, as those would be easiest for the old grandmothers and grandfathers to eat.

"Little Lan-er made these ones, with red bean and glutinous rice filling. I made the rest." Jiang Yexue arranged the zongzi carefully as he spoke. His fair and slender fingers paused over another pile of unfortunate-looking zongzi before shifting away. He coughed lightly, a little awkward. "Chenqing, yours…and Xihe-jun's…are wrapped quite well, it's just that they're not…very suitable for gifting. So I'll leave those here."

Yue Chenqing and Mo Xi stayed silent.

Jiang Yexue lowered his head to pick out a few of Gu Mang's zongzi. But as soon as he placed them in the basket, Gu Mang reached in to take them back out. "Mine don't need to go in either," he said, smiling. "Let's save them for ourselves; no need to offer such embarrassing attempts to others."

Jiang Yexue stared. The zongzi Gu Mang wrapped were firm and beautiful—what embarrassment was he talking about?

But Mo Xi swiftly understood. Gu Mang felt guilty. He worried those people's sons had fallen under his own sword. Regardless of his reasons, Gu Mang always felt uneasy about the blood he'd shed.

Mo Xi was quiet a moment. Taking a long stride forward, he stepped over to Jiang Yexue and took the basket from his hands. "Gu Mang and I will go. There're too many zongzi to give away."

He took Gu Mang firmly by the wrist, giving him no opportunity to pull away. "Let's go."

"Eh?" Gu Mang exclaimed. "Wait—wait a minute—"

But why should Mo Xi listen? This man was tall and strong and stubborn, on top of being stuffier than a sealed gourd. As Mo Xi dragged him along, it was all Gu Mang could do to grab a silver-edged mask from his qiankun pouch and push it onto his face.

“What’s all this about?”

Mo Xi said nothing.

The neighborhood around Jiang Yexue’s courtyard was filled with old houses and narrow streets laid out in winding, complicated paths. Mo Xi stowed the zongzi in his qiankun pouch, then strode down the alleyways, towing Gu Mang behind him. He remained silent the whole way, refusing to let go of Gu Mang’s wrist no matter what he said. Only after they had left the Jiang residence far behind and arrived at a completely deserted little side street did he release his hold.

Before Gu Mang could make his escape, Mo Xi braced an arm against the stone wall behind Gu Mang and looked down at him. “I’m going to tell you once more.”

Gu Mang’s blue eyes flickered restlessly. “Tell me what?”

“The reason people are grieving in Chonghua is not because of you, but because of the Liao Kingdom. You sent all the intelligence and prevented all the killing you could.”

As Mo Xi spoke, he took hold of Gu Mang’s hand. He could feel Gu Mang’s fidgeting, so he held tighter, interlacing their fingers. “Stop thinking your hands are covered in blood, okay?” He lifted that hand and pressed a gentle kiss to the back of it.

Under Mo Xi’s adoring gaze, shining from beneath long lashes, Gu Mang’s stiff spine gradually relaxed. He licked his lips as if to speak but didn’t seem to know what to say. “But—”

“No buts.”

“Except—”

“No excepts.”

“I—”

Mo Xi sighed and put a hand over his mouth. His eyes were filled with heartache and helplessness as they looked down at Gu Mang, as well as the sorrow he thought he'd hidden very well.

"You're the best," Mo Xi murmured. "You always have been."

Gu Mang blinked his blue eyes, then shook his head.

Mo Xi raised his other hand, pressed down on Gu Mang's head, and forced him to nod once, twice.

Gu Mang didn't know what to say. That ragged old heart twinged with a sharp pain that seemed to pump through his body with his blood. His tongue flicked out and licked Mo Xi's palm.

Caught off guard, Mo Xi pulled his hand back on reflex. Gu Mang seized the opportunity to jump up and turn the tables, pinning Mo Xi against the wall. But Mo Xi was so much taller than he was. When Mo Xi had an arm on the wall, caging Gu Mang in, he exuded the proper aura. But with the roles reversed, Gu Mang had to look up a little to meet Mo Xi's eyes. He was already at a disadvantage on the basis of height alone. The pose seemed less like intimidation, and more like…a pouty performance.

Gu Mang's cheek twitched at this terrifying thought. But Mo Xi's complete impassivity, the way his expressionless gaze seemed to ask *What do you think you're doing?* annoyed him to such a degree that he *had* to put him in his place. He hopped up to headbutt Mo Xi with his own masked forehead.

There was a muted *clunk*.

"How 'bout that?" Gu Mang asked, smug. "Does it hurt?"

Mo Xi blinked wordlessly.

"It *should* hurt. Today, your Gu Mang-gege will teach you a lesson about seniority and brotherly etiquette."

Mo Xi's only response was to grab him and wrap one hand tightly around his waist. With his other, he took hold of Gu Mang's silver-edged mask and pushed it over his forehead.

Behind the mask was a pale face, one that had once been soft and brilliant. It had slender and gentle eyes, a smooth jawline, a straight and

delicate nose, and glossy red lips as sweet as juicy berries. Those long lashes framed eyes of a blue deeper than the rivers and lakes.

Mo Xi brushed a callused thumb over Gu Mang's mouth. He raised his chin, gaze dragging up from Gu Mang's lips before sinking into those indigo pools. "Mn. Thank you for the lesson."

Those depthless blue eyes looked back in silence.

"Shige, please teach me some more."

He lowered his head to steal a kiss.

At that moment, rustling came from around the corner. Ever vigilant, Mo Xi lowered Gu Mang's mask before shielding him from view in his embrace. "Who's there?" he snapped.

A young cultivator wearing the uniform of the Northern Frontier Army edged out of the shadows. He was clearly on his way home from grocery shopping; he hugged a basket of fresh greens and turnips, together with a bundle of mint. Face white with terror, he peeked out unsteadily, voice shaking. "S-S-Stepdad, hello!"

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Chapter 139:
War Starts Again

THE POT OF HOT WATER came to a burbling boil. Grabbing a handkerchief, the young cultivator picked up the hot copper handle and carefully poured water into a red clay teapot.

The small house was composed of a narrow hall and small kitchen separated by a blue cloth screen on the left. A flimsy door hid the bedroom behind it on the right. Only after wiping the table down three or four times did the cultivator bring out the tea tray. In addition to the freshly steeped tea, the tray held two plates of fruits and nuts.

"G-General Mo, please have some tea."

He'd finally gotten it right. Earlier in the alley, this cultivator must have been scared out of his wits to slip up and call Mo Xi *Stepdad*.

"And this…" He timidly raised his eyes, gazing at Gu Mang in fear. "Um…"

What should he say? Stepmother? Stepmommy?

His second guest was wearing a mask that hid their features completely, so the cultivator wasn't sure how to address them. But he was absolutely certain of what he'd seen in the alley. The Northern Frontier Army's General Mo, their Xihe-jun, as cold and aloof as a holy deity, had definitely been about to kiss this person.

Mo Xi had cleared his throat and explained sand had gotten into his friend's eye, and he was helping blow it out. Who on earth would believe him? The cultivator was equal parts curious and terrified—heavens above, he'd unmasked Xihe-jun's infidelity on his way back from getting groceries!

What should he do, what should he *do*? Would Xihe-jun kill him to keep his secret safe? What kind of ethereal beauty did this stepmother possess? How long had they been involved? Did Princess Mengze know?

Mo Xi sat at the table, his expression cool and indifferent. He had no idea the head of his respectful-looking subordinate was bubbling madly, each bubble holding an extremely dangerous question. He sipped his tea. As that cultivator stared at his thin, pale lips, more bubbles burst in his head:

Everyone said thin-lipped men were fickle. He'd once thought Xihe-jun the exception—who would've expected he was the same as the rest? Ah, poor Princess Mengze… She'd waited faithfully all these years just to be tossed aside at the drop of a hat. How abominable!

On second thought, this "stepmother" hadn't spoken from the moment they met. He hadn't heard her voice nor seen her face, and her robes were loose, making her physique hard to determine. Could it be that this *was* Princess Mengze? If the princess wanted to accompany Xihe-jun without attracting attention, she might reasonably wear a mask.

The cultivator was in such a tizzy he must have made a face despite himself. Mo Xi looked at him rather incredulously and set down his cup. "Is something the matter?"

"N-no! Nothing's the matter! I am a piece of wood without thoughts!"

Mo Xi blinked at him.

The cultivator covered his face with his hands. After a moment, he peeked from between his fingers, voice muffled. "General Mo, would this…um…your friend—like anything to drink?"

"Some tea as well," Mo Xi replied. "We're just gifting zongzi to the neighbors on Qingxu Elder's behalf; we won't be here long. There's no need to put yourself out." Mo Xi reached into his qiankun pouch for some of the sweet and savory zongzi they had wrapped at Jiang Yexue's, but was unsure how many to leave. "How many people are in your family?"

The cultivator scratched his head. "It's just me."

Gu Mang couldn't help his quiet hum of surprise.

The cultivator turned to him in bewilderment. And it was no wonder—though Gu Mang's utterance was soft, it was low, much lower than the voice of a woman.

Oh no. As the atmosphere began to grow awkward, he heard Mo Xi's mild voice. "My friend caught a cold yesterday and can't really talk because of a sore throat… Could we trouble you to steep a pot of hot ginger tea?"

"Ooh… A sore throat…" the cultivator mumbled, letting out a sigh. "Of course."

After fumbling through this variety of mishaps, Gu Mang and Mo Xi drank their tea, gave the cultivator his zongzi, and exchanged a few more words before bidding him a polite farewell.

Once they were in the street again, Mo Xi asked, "Why were you so surprised when you heard him speak?"

"Oh, it's a long story," Gu Mang replied. "That kid used to be one of my men."

"I know."

"You do? My remaining thirty thousand soldiers all went to your Northern Frontier Army; I didn't think you could tell which ones were my old brothers and which ones you recruited afterward."

"It's quite easy to tell," said Mo Xi.

"How?"

"Those cultivators of yours all call me Stepdad." Mo Xi's steel-toed military boots clicked crisply against the stone as they walked. "They think I don't know, but I do," he continued. "That young man was the same—when he got anxious in the alleyway and called me Stepdad, I knew right away he was one of yours."

Gu Mang rubbed his nose in embarrassment. After a pause he managed, "Those disobedient little brats, coming up with random nicknames for you."

"It's fine," Mo Xi said. "Unlike me, you really are more like a dad. See, even after so many years, you remember each cultivator's face, but I don't have much impression of them. I'm not good at memorizing these things. I've never been very close with them."

Gu Mang smiled. "You filled your brain memorizing scrolls of magic techniques and reports from the frontier. There's no room for faces."

If the conversation continued in this direction, the topic might turn to the Northern Frontier Army's reconstitution. Mo Xi didn't plan to let it—he didn't want Gu Mang to find out about the Vow of Calamity.

Mo Xi's style of command was like his personality: stiff as a board and cold as ice. It was easy to come to the mistaken conclusion that he didn't think much of his foot soldiers. He had no gift for stirring men's hearts with words, nor any skill at uniting the troops with a gentle touch. This was why, years after he had taken over the Northern Frontier Army, his cultivators revered him and feared him, but didn't love him. Other than the emperor, few in Chonghua knew he had once offered up ten years of his life to vouch for this scrap of an army. Certainly none of the soldiers of the Northern Frontier Army knew what the man they called their stepdad had done for them.

In hindsight, the vow had made little difference. Gu Mang had already guaranteed the safety of his men, so Mo Xi's oath amounted to nothing more than the emperor taking advantage of him a second time. Even if Mo Xi hadn't made that deadly vow, the emperor would have pardoned those thirty thousand loyal soldiers.

But what did it matter? Living within the game meant no one knew the truth. The troops' stepdad was stuffy and stern. No one was all-knowing; how could they know what mysteries hid beneath his outward appearance? Perhaps he had his own failings here or there, but he had done his utmost—had forfeited years of his own life—to protect these people he thought were in danger.

Despite it all, what he received in return was a terrified address of Stepdad, and remarks like *General Mo is a noble after all. He wouldn't share our views*. Who said a group's collective scorn was reserved for those below them? In truth, this commander who had stepped out from the nobility and into the mud had long since, and unintentionally, been scorned to the bone by his own soldiers.

"But that cultivator," Mo Xi said. "Why were you shocked when you heard him say he was alone in his family?"

"Oh—you see, he looks so young; he enlisted when he was sixteen," Gu Mang replied. "At the time, he was the youngest junior under my command. When I asked him why he joined up, he said he had three elder

brothers, and all of them had joined the military. He didn't want to be left home alone, so he couldn't laze around any longer." Gu Mang's eyes dimmed. "Those three elder brothers of his were fine, righteous young men. When I left Chonghua, I seem to remember all three of them were alive. I didn't expect…"

Mo Xi was quiet a moment. "Blades have always been heartless. Don't read into this too deeply. No single man can guarantee the safety of all. You did everything you could; your conscience should be clear."

Gu Mang made no sound. After a long pause, he blurted, "The eldest brother from that family—he said, as soon as he had enough money to buy a house, he would take a wife and live a peaceful life." Finally, he sighed. "If only the war would end soon."

That was impossible. On the contrary, the end of the armistice was drawing closer every day.

Not long after the Dragon Boat Festival, an urgent report came from the northern frontier. The Liao Kingdom had reneged on the terms of the treaty, shattering the promise of two peaceful years. Their forces had launched a surprise attack on Shituo Gate, the weakest pass along Chonghua's border. Shituo Gate requested emergency aid.

When the news arrived, the emperor was in the throes of a flare-up, so ill he couldn't even move. He had no choice but to entrust the situation to Murong Mengze on his behalf. Many of his officials, oblivious to the truth of his condition, were greatly dissatisfied with the emperor's decision and didn't hesitate to wag their tongues—

"What illness is afflicting His Imperial Majesty?"

"If His Imperial Majesty is indisposed, he should be diagnosed by the three elders of Shennong Terrace, and his illness announced to the ministers of the court. Why is he blowing us off and going into seclusion? What about holding court? This behavior is without precedent in any generation or dynasty!"

Mo Xi could sense the mood spreading throughout the court: these officials didn't yet know the emperor was afflicted with an incurable disease, but paper could only hide fire for so long. Many clever-minded

people had already guessed the truth, but couldn't be sure and dared not rashly investigate.

Then there were those few old nobles lacking in intelligence. Though they hadn't at all guessed what was wrong with the emperor, his appointment of Mengze piqued them to no end. At least for now, they didn't dare aim their complaints at the emperor, but they had plenty to say about Mengze.

Mengze intended to send Chonghua's Winged Cavalry at all speed, then dispatch several battalions from the two nearest fort garrisons to stabilize the dangerous situation at Shituo Gate. Mo Xi approved; it was a sensible strategy. He just hadn't expected the motion to be vetoed by so much of the court.

"The Winged Cavalry is under His Imperial Majesty's direct command. How can we so carelessly move it from the imperial capital?"

"Deploying troops is a serious matter. If the princess wishes to mobilize this many men, we must first call a war council."

And these voices were among the more reasonable. Many others expressed their objections directly to Mengze, confident in their reputations as distinguished seniors.

"Murong Mengze, you're a woman. What *right* do you have to wield military power?"

"It would be one thing if Wangshu-jun took up the reins. You're not even a court official. We're both of us kin to the imperial family—who outranks whom here? We respect His Imperial Majesty's orders, of course; it's all well and good for you to hold court on his behalf. But we can't possibly have a little girl command the army, can we? If something serious were to happen, who would take responsibility?"

Even with the support of the officials from Mo Xi's Bureau of Military Affairs, Mengze's military orders were delayed again and again by tedious bickering and the cycle of political checks and balances.

Thus Shituo Gate was lost. The black magic army of the Liao Kingdom marched south with banners aloft, capturing three major border cities: Feng City, Da'ze City, and Di City. The civilian populace was

captured, and tens of thousands of defending soldiers slaughtered without mercy.

By the time this news came, the emperor had returned to health and convened the court, but it was too late. He sat on the throne with the border reports from the past score of days spread out before him, his countenance terrifying.

“Before Shituo Gate sent their emergency request for aid, they asked for reinforcements fourteen times, and mounted a desperate resistance for seven days.” The emperor slapped the pile of military reports onto the table and looked up, eyes flashing with icy menace above the white fur of his collar. “We gave Mengze authority. Were all of you dead, or did you fall pregnant and were scared to lose the baby? Why did you cower and refuse to mobilize troops?!”

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Chapter 140: Demonblood Beast

FACED WITH THE EMPEROR'S WRATH, everyone murmured their agreement. No one dared stick their neck out.

"Speak," the emperor commanded. "When Mengze sat here on my behalf, didn't you all have quite a lot to say? What now? Our ministers have all gone mute?"

One graybeard noble stepped out from the ranks. "Your Imperial Majesty, dispatching troops to Shituo was indeed a matter of great urgency, but such major military action requires Your Imperial Majesty's personal approval. If Princess Mengze is to make a decision on Your Imperial Majesty's behalf, many groups must weigh in before it can be implemented. Otherwise, it goes against all regulations."

"Regulations?" The emperor narrowed his eyes, his expression growing dangerous. "Fascinating. What regulations?"

"The systems of the nation of Chonghua, the rules set down by our ancestors—"

"Our ancestors' rules have cost us three frontier cities!" The emperor cut him off, baring his teeth. "To hell with your regulations!"

That old noble flinched, his wrinkled neck shrinking back like a turtle's. The emperor's fury finally got the better of him as he burst into thunderous rage before the court, slamming a hand on the table. "What do you want?" he demanded. "Does it matter if it's a man or a woman giving orders? We will appoint whomever we wish to take charge on our behalf! Or did you all expect we would let you have the final say? May as well fetch a pig from the backyard and set it on our throne!"

He continued, "We'll not speak of Da'ze just yet. A Liao army three hundred thousand strong once attempted to invade Feng City but were beaten back by our nation. Di City is an ancient, crucial foothold for Chonghua. Since time immemorial, every enemy attack there has met with failure—yet this time, these three cities were occupied within the span of twenty days. Even a pig wouldn't allow such a travesty! Who overruled

Mengze's orders? Who refused to let her dispatch troops to Shituo? Was it you?!" The emperor jabbed a finger directly at the old noble who had spoken up.

"O-of course it wasn't this old subject!" the old man hastily replied. "How could this old subject alone have decided such a major thing? It was, it was…"

"It was *what*?! You blabber without cease yet go mute as soon as it's time to be held accountable. Speak up! Unless we should ask Mengze to name names? Mengze!"

Mengze had been granted an exemption to attend court as a woman. She wore an official's headpiece of black gauze trimmed in gold, as well as a black official's robe in phoenix-patterned jacquard. Though the robe had wide sleeves, the tailoring of the waist was straight and clean, lending her a sharp, gallant air unlike her usual aura. Thus addressed, her long lashes fluttered low as she spoke. "Imperial Brother, please quell your rage. Shituo Gate is lost, and three cities have fallen to enemy hands—we can't predict what the Liao Kingdom will do next. Now is not the time to assign blame. I ask Imperial Brother to first take inventory, transfer troops from the Northern Frontier Army, and prepare a counterattack."

The old nobles had all worried that Mengze, having endured all manner of bigotry in the past few days, would take the first opportunity to tattle to her big brother. Now they let out a great sigh of relief and silently applauded her—this girl didn't even take the chance to strike back! How gentle she was!

"Of course, of course," one of the nobles piped up. "Your Imperial Majesty, you see, we were only concerned with upholding the important regulations of Chonghua's imperial court. Our hearts were in the right place, though the outcome was certainly not ideal. Please be appeased."

"Quite right," someone else added. "Your Imperial Majesty, a family has its rules, and a nation has its laws. Your subjects made decisions based on the nation's own dictums. It caused the loss of three cities and a pass, yes, but law and order have been preserved. This is not necessarily without merit."

As soon as he heard this, the emperor's quiescent rage kindled back to life.

Unbelievably, another noble chimed in. “Your Imperial Majesty fell sick for more than twenty days; we subjects had great cause for concern. If Your Imperial Majesty is afflicted with some serious illness, by law, the council of elders must be informed as soon as possible. Such secrecy strikes needless worry into the hearts of your court officials.”

The emperor lost his temper. Inhaling sharply, he looked up through eyes reddened with hatred. “Some advisors!” he shouted, palms striking the table. “Not a single useful suggestion out of your mouths—are they only good for petty gossip?!”

The hall fell silent.

The official who had been first to offer advice did so with such self-assurance because his family possessed a token of immunity granted by Chonghua’s first emperor. His network of connections spanned all levels of the court. Now, he only feigned alarm. “Your Imperial Majesty mustn’t get angry. Ensuring the health of the emperor is our most urgent duty.”

Seething with rage, the emperor turned away, as if unable to bear the sight of the trash in front of him. He stared in silence at one of the great hall’s pillars and attempted to calm himself to no avail. Fury flooded his chest, drowning him in formless hatred.

He closed his eyes. Then, flinging his sleeves, he overturned the table before him with a deafening crash. Cherries and pears scattered across the floor, and the court scrolls and memorials fell in a disordered heap. “Get out! Get the hell out! All of you *get the hell out!”*

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty!”

As the crowd hurriedly acquiesced, the emperor spoke again, panting for breath as he glared at his officials through eyes scarlet with rage. “Hold it.”

Everyone froze.

“Xihe-jun, you stay behind.”

In minutes, only Mo Xi and the emperor remained in the hall.

The emperor heaved a deep sigh, slumping in exhaustion. Leaning back on the dragon throne, he turned hollow eyes to the vaulted roof carved with dragons and phoenixes, painted in vermilion and lavishly gilded.

“Token of immunity… Token of immunity!” The emperor spat. “What a gift the ancestors have left us! Enabling a group of useless hangers-on, each of them scrambling to get ahead of the others. Why should we keep them? It’d be more effective to raise a horde of thoughtless bamboo warriors! Why not just give these orders and titles to some simple-minded bamboo men?! It would save us the headache!”

“Your Imperial Majesty, there’s no need to continue to speak of such wild imaginings.”

“What’s wild about them?” the emperor snapped, voice dark. “We’d rather have pigs with neither brains nor ambition than subjects with ambition but no brains!”

Mo Xi pressed his thin lips into a line. This emperor had come into power when Chonghua was on the cusp of reform; the level of pushback he’d met with was almost unprecedented. When he was undermined both overtly and covertly at every turn, he would always burst forth with ideas like *it’d be better to keep a pile of obedient bamboo warriors* whenever he felt hemmed in.

Mo Xi sighed to himself. He had no wish to entertain any more nonsense. “How does Your Imperial Majesty plan to strike back at Liao?”

Unexpectedly, the emperor replied, “I’m afraid we must do more than strike back.” He brought a hand to his brow, massaging his temples. “Xihe-jun, do you know why we couldn’t leave seclusion for over twenty days?”

“The freezing illness.”

“If that’s so, why didn’t we ask you to come expel the cold as usual?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

The emperor straightened his spine, figure shrouded by the horizontal plaque hanging in the throne room. “Xihe-jun’s driven out the cold for us all these years—have you never once wondered how we fell ill?”

“If Your Imperial Majesty doesn’t speak of it, I won’t ask.”

“Yes, you’ve always been prudent.” The emperor nodded. “You only lose your head when it comes to that dear shixiong of yours.” After a pause, the emperor continued. “We’ve not kept the truth from you on purpose; it

was only that the moment was not right. Given the current circumstances, we believe it's time we explain."

"Please speak, Your Imperial Majesty."

The emperor deliberated a moment, then sighed. "This story properly begins with the old tales of the Liao Kingdom's founding. We assume we needn't recount those events in detail—from graying elders to toddling children, there's likely no one in Chonghua who doesn't know this story. Preceptor Chen Tang once made an exception to take the slave Hua Po'an as his disciple, which ended in Hua Po'an's treason. Hua Po'an secretly amassed an army of traitors, named himself king at Chonghua's northern frontier, and founded that nation of ten thousand evils. Everyone across the Nine Provinces knows they use savage methods and favor black magic. But —" Here the emperor raised his head. "Have you ever thought where the Liao Kingdom's techniques originated?"

"Hua Po'an was a singular genius when it came to magic," answered Mo Xi. "Of the black magic techniques in use there today, most were his own invention."

"But how could he have produced so many original spells? He was raised as a slave without education. Who was it that showed him this path?"

There was only one answer: Chen Tang.

Mo Xi frowned. "But Chen Tang never dirtied his hands with such unorthodox arts."

"Who said the origins of unorthodox techniques must be unorthodox in themselves?" the emperor replied. "In the five years General Gu spied for us in Liao, he sent back intelligence on many of the Liao Kingdom's black magic techniques. Other than a small fraction of spells pulled entirely from some of the last writings of the demon tribe, we discovered there were many echoes of Chonghua's techniques. Think of it like this—Hua Po'an was a brilliant mind. A man like him wouldn't have wanted to learn magic by rote memorization and mimicry. Once he mastered Chen Tang's techniques, he would almost certainly have sunk time into making them more extraordinary, more powerful. Chen Tang prioritized reliability; Hua Po'an prioritized novelty and danger."

With a flourish of his fingers, the emperor conjured a red-gold flame in his palm. “This is the Nine Lotus Flame technique passed down by Preceptor Chen. It’s capable of expelling weak demonic qi from afflicted commoners—you should be familiar with it.”

The emperor turned his hand to form two more sigils. The warm flame was swiftly extinguished, replaced by a twisting vortex of blue-black miasma.

Mo Xi’s eyes widened. “The Damned-Heart Sutra?”

“Correct,” the emperor said. “This is the Damned-Heart Sutra we recreated using the notes on black magic techniques provided by Subject Gu. You likely found this spell a massive headache in the years you crossed swords with the Liao Kingdom. It is a perfect reversal of the Nine Lotus Flame—it allows commoners to be consumed by demonic qi.”

The emperor dispersed the Damned-Heart Sutra with another flourish. “But Xihe-jun, if it weren’t for Gu Mang discovering the technical diagrams of the Damned-Heart Sutra for us, we would’ve never known there were merely two sigils separating our flame technique from this black magic.”

Mo Xi stood for an astonished beat. “Your Imperial Majesty is saying many of Hua Po’an’s techniques bear incontrovertible signs of Chen Tang’s influence.”

“Correct. Most of the Liao Kingdom’s black magic spells have their roots in Chonghua’s techniques. Hua Po’an was born of Chonghua and learned from Chen Tang; no matter how he changed later, one cannot escape their origins. Now, returning to the topic at hand. Do you recall how Preceptor Chen lost his life?”

Mo Xi thought. “The history books say he sacrificed himself to destroy the Demonblood Beast that Hua Po’an refined.”

The emperor nodded. “The Demonblood Beast was vicious and cruel, a terrifying creature. Had it been allowed to grow at will, it would have wielded colossal powers of destruction. What’s more, it emitted an ever-present demonic aura capable of affecting the minds of all living creatures within thirty miles—simply by existing, it gradually infected people with malevolent qi, turning them violent and bloodthirsty. The legends are truly

the stuff of nightmares; they call it a demon beast that can never be killed. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, it can revive itself from death. Thus, even though Chen Tang sealed it, many generations of Chonghua's emperors have been wary of that beast's return. By my Imperial Father's generation…"

He paused. "In order to meet that unlikely risk, he deceived his subjects and carried out a secret experiment."

Mo Xi tensed. "Did the late emperor want to make another Demonblood Beast?"

"No."

"Then…"

"When he looked through the diagrams and secret records Chen Tang left behind, he found a set of scrolls describing the raising of a spirit beast. The creature it spoke of was nearly identical to the demon beast, but its abilities were completely reversed. It was an entity capable of purification. Our Imperial Father hoped to surreptitiously raise a spirit beast capable of countering the Demonblood Beast."

This secret was frankly unbelievable. Mo Xi found himself momentarily speechless—the late emperor once wanted to raise a creature similar to the Demonblood Beast in the service of Chonghua? He took a moment to wrap his head around this information. "But if there was such a spirit beast…why didn't Chen Tang make it back then?" he eventually asked.

"Because although the spirit beast is capable of purification, the refinement process was cruel and dangerous. Chen Tang sealed these records, and our Imperial Father failed in his attempt. However—as we see it, the reason for our Imperial Father's failure wasn't merely that the technique is inherently difficult. Since antiquity, major accomplishments have required the right circumstances. Timing, location, and people: none of these can be imperfect or lacking. When my late father attempted to raise the spirit beast, Chen Tang was long gone, and the scrolls were difficult to understand. The timing was not right. In addition, Da'ze City—where Chen Tang sealed the Demonblood Beast—was in the hands of the Liao Kingdom. There was no way to investigate the flow of spiritual energy, so the location was not right. As for the final element…"

He came to a pause, absently turning the string of dzi beads on his wrist. “This venture was risky. Our Imperial Father couldn’t announce it to the world, and the few who knew all had their own agendas. In the end, the conflict between them could not be resolved; thus the people were not right either. The odds were stacked against him on three fronts.”

He continued, “My late father’s venture was considered a failure. No one knows where the incomplete body of the spirit beast ended up. Perhaps it fell apart on its own, or perhaps he destroyed it; this has always been an enigma. The raising of the spirit beast was erased from the annals of Chonghua, but the traces it left behind—”

The emperor stopped and looked at Mo Xi. “Everyone who secretly interacted with the spirit beast experienced unusual mutations to various degrees.”

Mo Xi narrowed his eyes. “Who?”

“The records were strictly classified and later destroyed; even we can’t name them all. As far as we know, three individuals were affected for certain.” The emperor had stopped spinning the bracelet and now thumbed a single bead. “The first—Zhou Xiao.”

“Zhou He’s father?”

“Correct. The former grand elder of Sishu Terrace. At the time, he was likely the grandmaster in charge of refining the spirit beast. He acquired an abnormal bloodthirstiness.”

Mo Xi contemplated this in silence. The bloody legends surrounding the Zhou Clan were too numerous to count. Zhou He’s penchant for cracking open skulls and poking through brains had long ceased to be news. His father Zhou Xiao had died an early death; Mo Xi didn’t have much impression of him. But he did recall that this grand elder loved his meat raw and bloody at the end-of-year feasts… He would never have imagined this was the reason.

“Is Zhou He’s cruelty related to this as well?”

“Yes,” the emperor answered. “Where they had close contact with their blood kin, the mutations those cultivators underwent unwittingly permeated the bodies of their relations. Zhou He undoubtedly has his father to thank for his own taste for blood.”

“Then…what about the second? Who was the second person?”

“It was Murong Xuan.”

“Murong Lian’s father?!”

The emperor nodded. “Murong Xuan was our late father’s own blood brother. He was also involved in this secret plan, but his situation was unusual. He had an argument with our late father early on and refused to participate in the project. Not long after, he lost his life on the battlefield. The spirit beast’s effect on him was minimal and didn’t seem to affect Murong Lian at all. We’re only certain he was the second person because of his grave.”

The emperor spun a few more dzi beads. “The burial mounds atop Warrior Soul Mountain are all sealed with white jade. This type of jade is dense and pure, and does not easily erode. It is capable of preserving the buried person as they were in life—with the exception of the late Wangshu.

“Some years ago, the cemetery guards reported that the late Wangshu’s jade gravestone appeared to be a counterfeit. Within two short decades, it had begun to deteriorate and discolor. Of course we ordered craftsmen to repair the grave. But once the jade sealing stone was opened, the craftsmen discovered the body within had blackened completely—consumed by the mutation.”

Mo Xi frowned. “Does Murong Lian know of this?”

“He wasn’t in the capital at the time, so he never found out. The truth of this matter is cruel; we have always kept it from him.”

Faced with Mo Xi’s silence, the emperor sighed. “Isn’t it always so? The person sitting atop this throne must keep far too many secrets. There are some things even we would rather not know.” He paused. “No matter. We won’t speak of them now. The third person…”

By this time, Mo Xi didn’t need him to say it; after the first two examples, his identity was obvious. Mo Xi closed his eyes and spoke frankly. “If I’ve guessed correctly, the third person is the late emperor himself.”

The emperor was taken aback. Then he grimaced. “You’re correct, the third person was our Imperial Father. His mutation was—”

“An unnatural fear of the cold.”

“…Yes.”

At some point, the late emperor of Chonghua had become abnormally afraid of the cold. He was a fire-type cultivator, but he developed a penchant for warming himself by stoves and wrapping himself in furs, a habit that grew more pronounced as the years passed. Everyone had chalked it up to his declining health as he aged; no one could have guessed such a truth lay behind it.

“Our late father didn’t know his condition was an effect of rearing the spirit beast, nor that it could be passed down to his descendants through mere proximity,” said the emperor. “He was in constant contact with us. And out of those three men, he lived the longest, and so the influence of his mutation on us was far more severe than the other two fathers on their children.”

The emperor lowered his lashes, playing with the string of beads as he continued, voice low. “We were weak in our youth, and naturally have a yin-aligned water-type spiritual flow. Over time, we succumbed to the freezing illness.” His voice quieted further, the eyes beneath his dark lashes flowing with turbulent emotion like an underground river. His thin lips opened softly. “Our late father unknowingly inflicted this illness that would plague us for a lifetime. But when he eventually learned of our disease, he thought of deposing his heir…”

The emperor sighed and said no more. The water clock in the shape of the legendary tortoise Bixi dripped quietly in the corner of the throne room; fresh drops landed on the reflections in the pool, shattering the peace into rippling waves.

Even the simplest person harbored a few dark secrets, to say nothing of an age-old nation. Mo Xi had only known the emperor was afflicted by an incurable freezing illness. He hadn’t known the cause, much less its connection to the late emperor. For a moment, he didn’t know what to say.

The emperor sighed. “Forget it; what’s done is done. Right now, our cause for grief is the loss of Da’ze City, where Chen Tang sealed the Demonblood Beast. Ever since that decisive battle between Chen Tang and the Liao Kingdom, the city has been contested territory. The Liao Kingdom had always known that if they wanted to revive their demon beast, Da’ze

must fall under their control. As for us…whether for defense of our borders or for the study of this magic, we could not surrender Da’ze.

“Over the course of the past few centuries, Chonghua and Liao have fought battle after battle at Da’ze and traded possession of this land. During the late emperor’s reign, Da’ze was a territory of the Liao Kingdom. But shortly after we took the throne, Chonghua reclaimed the city. The first thing we did was secretly dispatch members of Sishu Terrace to investigate what traces they could find of the Demonblood Beast’s seal.”

“And what were the results?” asked Mo Xi.

The emperor shook his head. “If they were made public, panic would seize all of Chonghua.” The emperor hesitated, then continued quietly, “The Demonblood Beast’s seal has already been broken.”

Mo Xi flinched in surprise.

“During the dozen or so years the Liao Kingdom controlled Da’ze,” the emperor explained, “they successfully released the Demonblood Beast’s seal and excavated it from the depths of Da’ze Lake.”

Mo Xi’s pupils shrank. “If the Liao Kingdom has already re-acquired the Demonblood Beast, why haven’t they made any unusual advances?”

“The seal has been broken, but it’s possible the Demonblood Beast was injured too severely in that last battle and lost too much of its vital energy,” the emperor answered. “As far as we know, it remains in a dormant state and cannot be commanded by the Liao Kingdom’s cultivators. But the most formidable barrier is gone—if it’s merely sleeping, it can be reawakened.”

The emperor sighed. “The first time we heard this secret report, we could hardly sleep for weeks. Night and day, we wondered if the Demonblood Beast was capable of revival. Perhaps the Liao Kingdom had skillful grandmasters who could restore its soul after it was sealed for centuries. If they did, then how long would they need?”

Mo Xi had no reply.

The emperor brought a hand to his forehead and massaged his brow. “Xihe-jun, now do you understand why we so urgently needed someone of unquestionable loyalty to spy on the Liao Kingdom?” His voice was low.

“We must know every detail of their progress with the Demonblood Beast. There is no second Chen Tang to protect the gates of Chonghua.”

“What is the Demonblood Beast’s current condition, then?” Mo Xi asked gravely.

“It took Gu Mang an entire year to dig up any useful information on it. After the seal was broken, the Demonblood Beast was placed within a soul-preserving pouch to recuperate. But Chen Tang damaged it so severely that its power waned continuously despite their best attempts resuscitate it. As of yet, there have been no signs of its reawakening.”

Upon seeing the sharp furrow of Mo Xi’s brows ease, the emperor warned, “Do not relax just yet. We had previously thought the threat posed by the Demonblood Beast was more or less contained, and didn’t merit excessive worry. But recently, a Sishu Terrace cultivator stationed in Da’ze sent us a secret missive: our people had detected a wisp of the Demonblood Beast’s soul in the lake it was sealed in.”

Mo Xi’s eyes flew wide. “So the Demonblood Beast has remained dormant not because it’s too weak, but because the Liao Kingdom was missing this piece of its soul?”

“Exactly so,” the emperor replied. “Chen Tang shattered the Demonblood Beast’s soul so thoroughly that a wisp of it escaped from the seal and sank into the lake without anyone taking notice. Precisely due to this missing scrap of soul, the Liao Kingdom has spent decades incapable of waking their nation’s most fearsome weapon. This wisp of soul thus became the most crucial element in our fight against Liao. When we learned of this, we immediately sent people to track down the remnant we had detected within the lake. But the task was like fishing for a needle in the ocean. After six or seven years of searching, we’d only narrowed down the area enough to make a true investigation feasible within the past few months. That range still covers more than thirty miles of the lake. If we employ standard tracking methods, locating it would take many more months. We wish to banish this danger as soon as possible. So we took a risk.”

“What?” asked Mo Xi.

The emperor lifted a pale finger, pointing at his own temple. “Summoning. We were infected by the spirit beast in our youth and afflicted with the freezing illness, but in the process, we also gained some of the

spirit beast's qi. The Demonblood Beast and the spirit beast are cast from the same mold; it stands to reason that we might have some capacity to summon it."

Mo Xi pressed his lips together, incredulous. "So Your Imperial Majesty spent the past few days comatose in an attempt to locate the Demonblood Beast's remnant scrap of soul?"

"Yes—in this flare-up of the freezing illness, what we needed was not timely relief, but rather to let it worsen as it willed. The more severe the effects, the heavier the spirit beast's qi on us becomes, and the easier to sense the Demonblood Beast. Just yesterday, we pinpointed the whereabouts of that bit of soul. We planned to send people to recover it at once…but we awoke to find that Da'ze City has been lost." As the words fell from his lips, the aura in the great hall seemed to grow darker and colder.

The emperor closed his eyes, tendons protruding on the back of his hands where they gripped the throne's armrests. His tone became menacing. "Ah, the Liao Kingdom—it must be that they, too, have finally discovered why the Demonblood Beast hasn't recovered. Now that they hold Da'ze, all that remains is tracking down that last wisp of soul. Once they take it into their hands, what awaits Chonghua will no longer be a stalemate over one or two cities, but a replication of that battle with Hua Po'an centuries ago."

His eyes filled with venom. "Xihe-jun, do you now understand the stakes at hand? This has bearing on the foundation of our nation; it's not a truth we would tell anyone whose loyalty is in question. The loss of Da'ze is far more serious than it seems to our officials. We will immediately dispatch troops to retake Da'ze, under your command. But you must understand—the goal is not the city; it is the remnant of the Demonblood Beast's soul within the lake. Find it as soon as possible."

After a pause, the emperor added, "If we fail in this, when the Demonblood Beast's soul is fully assembled—when it returns to life—it is not just Chonghua, but the entire cultivation world that will sink into chaos. By then…it will be too late. This calamity will span the continent and wreak destruction throughout the land."

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Chapter 141:
Return to Battle

WHEN MO XI RETURNED to his manor, Gu Mang was reading and writing in the study. The small, red-lacquered window was wide open to a view of scattered petals floating down outside. Gu Mang wore a relaxed, pale blue robe of hemp, his braid loosely looped into a messy bun at the back of his head. Shadows cast by the drifting flowers danced over his figure and the desk.

As soon as he saw the booklet Gu Mang had open on the table, Mo Xi knew he was once again recording those fading memories. Wholly focused on his work, he didn't notice Mo Xi's arrival. His cheeks were puffed out in concentration, his berry-red lips slightly pursed. Smoke-dark lashes cast gentle shadows over the bridge of his nose, fluttering from time to time.

Mo Xi couldn't bear to shatter his hard-won peace. He stood outside the half-open study doors and gazed into the room in silence.

After a long, long while, Gu Mang finished his notes for the day and lifted his head. Catching sight of Mo Xi outside the door, Gu Mang's blue eyes widened in surprise. "Eh? When did you get back? Have you been standing there this whole time?"

Mo Xi had never been a good liar, but at this moment, he spoke with a natural calm as he stepped into the room. "No. I've just returned."

"What happened?" Gu Mang asked. "Did His Imperial Majesty resume court today?"

"He did."

"That's good, then the cities near Shituo Gate will—"

"It's too late; we've lost Da'ze City as well. The news came today."

"*Another* city?!" exclaimed Gu Mang.

"Mn," Mo Xi replied. "His Imperial Majesty has already penned the edicts. In another shichen, they will go out to the residences to summon

everyone to the command platform at noon, where he'll appoint commanders and officially deploy the army to the northern frontier."

"He's already discussed this with you?"

Mo Xi paused. "Yes. I'll be leading the Northern Frontier Army, alongside fifty thousand cultivators of the Winged Cavalry under Murong Lian's command. Another fifty thousand cultivators of the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion are to join us, currently without a commander."

Gu Mang's brows knit as soon as he heard Murong Lian's name. Murong Lian had no interest in the battlefield these days and was chained to his pipe of ephemera. Why did the emperor insist on sending him into battle? When he heard the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion still lacked a commander, his frown deepened.

"He doesn't have anyone in mind?" Gu Mang asked.

Mo Xi shook his head. "He's set on appointing Mengze."

Gu Mang said nothing.

"Mengze has a weak constitution now, but she previously commanded the Scarlet Plumes. This division consists of the most skilled fighters from the ranks of the nobles. They'll obey orders, but they're arrogant. His Imperial Majesty worries no other commander will tolerate their attitude, so he intends to have Mengze take administrative control of the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion while leaving operations on the field to another."

Gu Mang pursed his lips. "Do you think that's His Imperial Majesty's true goal?"

"I won't guess at his motives," Mo Xi said. "I came back before heading to the command platform because I wanted to ask something of you. If it were possible, would you be willing to take command of the Scarlet Plume troops in Mengze's stead and come with me to the front lines?"

Gu Mang was stunned. "You want me to…command the old Scarlet Plumes?"

"Yes. Are you willing to do it?"

Gu Mang's shifting emotions showed clearly upon his face. Before he had the chance to gather himself, his cheeks had flushed in surprise and delight at hearing he could fight side by side with the soldiers of his own nation once again. But gradually, the enthusiastic color on his face retreated like the tide, and the light in his eyes dimmed.

"Mo Xi. I very much want to go with you to the front lines," Gu Mang said slowly. "Even if you hadn't told me, I would have gone without reservation as soon as I found out."

Mo Xi couldn't hold back a pained smile. "I know. Actually, I'd like to keep you as far from the front lines as possible—but if I really did stop you, you'd be unhappy, and you'd only blame me. I suggested this arrangement to the emperor."

Gu Mang froze in astonishment, then lowered his lashes. "Thank you."

Raising a hand, Mo Xi stroked Gu Mang's hair. Predictably, he put too much force into it, and Gu Mang's bun had been tied loosely. A few wisps came loose and hung, pitch-black, by Gu Mang's cheek. "In any case, there are benefits to bringing you," said Mo Xi. "At least I'll be able to keep an eye on you. If you're willing, I'll tell His Imperial Majesty—"

"I do want to go to the battlefield." Gu Mang cut him off. "But not as the commander of the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion."

Mo Xi waited for him to continue.

"I can no longer be a general," said Gu Mang. "Think about it—the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion is made up of cultivators from the royal bloodline. After so many years fighting against the Liao Kingdom, they'd hate me to the core. How would they listen to my commands? It's a fantasy."

Mo Xi paused. "If that's what you're worried about, there's no need for concern," answered Mo Xi. "You can wear a mask, and His Imperial Majesty will tell the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion you're an illustrious noble from the imperial family who, for certain reasons, cannot reveal their identity. With this explanation from His Imperial Majesty and me as commanding general, the cultivators won't act rashly no matter what they suspect."

Beneath Mo Xi's defined brows, those phoenix eyes, black as night, looked down at Gu Mang. That gaze was so gentle, devoid of urging or instigation, filled only with endless acceptance, like an ocean that had swallowed all the stars of the night sky.

"Only if you're willing," Mo Xi said. "If you're not, or if you'd rather be a foot soldier at my side, it's up to you."

But how could Gu Mang be unwilling? And how could he be unaware of the painstaking effort Mo Xi had gone to? If there came a future opportunity to reveal he'd been a spy, then leading the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion to glorious victory would be incontrovertible evidence of his service to the nation. Mo Xi must have worked arduously to secure this offer from the emperor, who had already set his sights on Murong Mengze out of motives of his own. Mo Xi had doubtless played some bargaining chip to win himself this boon from the emperor.

After a moment of silence, Gu Mang replied, "It would be best if Mengze went."

Though Mo Xi had more or less expected it, his gaze still flickered upon hearing Gu Mang give up this opportunity. Just as Gu Mang could tell, with one glance, what sacrifices Mo Xi had made, the risky moves he had committed to, the ways he pushed the emperor's limits… How could Mo Xi fail to see that his shixiong's refusal was also for him?

"Gu Mang…"

Gu Mang tucked his hands into the wide sleeves of his blue robe. "I can't lead the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion. All eyes would be on me; who knows what people may notice. If my identity was exposed in battle, it would throw our own troops into chaos. Plus, my memories have been slowly disappearing all this time. I don't know what kind of condition I'll be in by then. A commander must have a clear mind."

Mo Xi said nothing.

"I know what you're thinking." Taking in Mo Xi's gloomy expression, Gu Mang stepped forward to cup Mo Xi's cool cheek in his palm, traces of a gentle smile curving the ends of his eyes. "But I just want to do my part for Chonghua—I want to fight shoulder-to-shoulder with all of you, and stay by your side." He stood on his tiptoes and pressed his

forehead to Mo Xi's, letting his hand slip downward to lace their fingers together. "This time, just let me be an attendant at your side."

Mo Xi looked down. "This isn't the position you deserve…"

"It's the position I want."

Mo Xi said nothing.

"Be good." Gu Mang nuzzled his forehead against Mo Xi's. "I'm already so happy I can ride out with you for Chonghua. I'll ride with you, with the Northern Frontier Army. It'll be great, whatever happens. Mo Xi, we'll fight side-by-side again."

On the seventeenth day of the sixth month of the Chonghua calendar, at the height of summer, the Liao Kingdom reneged on the agreed armistice of two years and mounted a surprise attack on Shituo Gate. While Chonghua delayed dispatching their own forces, the Liao army pressed inward, swallowing the three cities of Feng, Di, and Da'ze, and taking possession of the crucial territory where Chen Tang once sealed the Demonblood Beast.

When the emperor woke from his sleep and received news of Da'ze City's capture, he immediately appointed his generals and prepared to recover it.

Wind buffeted the scarlet flags of war. The emperor stood beside the railing of the command platform, one arm tucked behind his back. On his left stood Mo Xi in a set of black robes trimmed in gold; on his right was Murong Lian, in robes of lavish sapphire.

The bright sun was at its zenith. The emperor's gaze swept over the three assembled armies arrayed meticulously before him. Gu Mang, still masked, stood within their ranks. The emperor's eyes paused on his figure, his head dipping in an almost imperceptible nod—thus he greeted his General Gu.

The generals of the Northern Frontier Army and the Winged Cavalry had already been given their commission. The emperor touched the dzi beads at his wrist, then performed a voice-amplifying technique to make himself audible to the entire drill ground. "Murong Mengze."

Murong Mengze stepped out to the side of the column of troops. “Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.”

Her features were soft and beautiful, her figure frail, but she held herself tall and upright. With her hair tied up and attired in a set of close-fitting military robes that marked her as a direct descendant of the imperial line, she was the picture of dignity. No one could tell she was an invalid with a broken core.

“We appoint you general of the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion,” the emperor proclaimed. “We expect that you will work in harmony with Wangshu-jun and support Xihe-jun as deputy generals in the expedition north to reclaim our lost cities.”

A murmur rippled through the army.

Murong Mengze bowed her head. “Understood.”

She took the golden arrow banner of command from the decree official’s hands and climbed the vermilion-carpeted steps onto the command platform to stand at Commander Mo Xi’s side.

The atmosphere on the command platform was solemn; those upon it were not permitted to turn and whisper into their neighbors’ ears. But when Mengze took her position as the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion’s general, disbelief and dissatisfaction showed on the faces of the distinguished nobles. Though they made no sound, the looks they exchanged spoke volumes—nothing more needed to be said.

There was no shortage of people in Chonghua who could take up this post, yet this golden arrow banner of command had been entrusted to Mengze. Were these the emperor’s own selfish motives at work? Could it be that he wanted to push Mengze and Xihe-jun together by having them fight shoulder-to-shoulder? Or was it purely out of a desire to alienate his other relatives…

All these suspicions rushed in undercurrents below the silent command platform.

In contrast, Gu Mang, who had dealt closely with the emperor, understood his intent perfectly. This battle was of crucial importance; he had deployed Chonghua’s most elite troops to ensure a certain victory.

These same distinguished nobles had tarried and quarreled among themselves until Chonghua lost three cities and a frontier pass fell into enemy hands, a great blow to the nation. At the time, Murong Mengze had been given total authority by the emperor, yet was questioned incessantly on account of her gender.

On a surface level, the nobles simply appeared unwilling to accept a woman in a position of power. But at the heart of it, those old noble families with their tokens of immunity and ancestral fiefdoms thought little of the emperor's authority in the first place. They had brazenly seized this opportunity to fulfill their own ends.

These parasitic noble clans were unrestrained in their arrogance—if the emperor appointed any one of them general of the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion, would it not amount to lifting his hand to slap his own face? Only by handing the position to Murong Mengze could he air his resentment; only thus could he warn the nobles without words: *We rule Chonghua. Whether they are women or slaves, we will use whomever we please, and none of you have a say in the matter.*

Under the brilliant sun and clear sky, the emperor said, "Two hundred thousand troops go forth to meet our enemy. The army marches for Da'ze!"

The drums of war thundered, and the voices of the troops rose as one. Armor glinted in the sunlight, weapons flashing. The cultivators of Chonghua shouted their oaths ahead of battle, their cries soaring up into the skies and piercing the clouds.

"On Your Imperial Majesty's orders! No victory, no return!"

"On Your Imperial Majesty's orders!"

"No victory, no return!"

Gu Mang was hidden among the crowd, an insignificant soldier. He watched the shouting cultivators on either side, listened to the grand clamor rising from the ranks. After a moment, he quietly followed along, reciting those vows that had once been carved into his heart but were now unfamiliar. Softly, he murmured, "We share the robes of battle.[3] No victory, no return…"

He mounted an ordinary warhorse the color of dates, the plumes on his helmet nodding in the wind.

The city gates opened, and the army advanced northward.

In that moment, he once again rode with his old friends, his comrades, and his Northern Frontier Army, now as an unremarkable foot soldier. Everything seemed to return to that sunlit beginning. He turned, and it was as though an equally youthful Lu Zhanxing were beside him, a still inexperienced Mo Xi, and those seventy thousand deceased brothers, mounting their horses to ride into battle. They were yet so young, while he was already so feebly aged.

“No victory, no return!”

To the sound of these ringing shouts, the troops marched from the drill grounds and toward the main road. Perhaps the sunlight was too bright; Gu Mang’s eyes stung as it streamed past his lashes, and his heart ached so acutely he wanted to weep.

Today, he finally set out for battle once more, just as when he had been a high-spirited youth of twenty.

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Chapter 142:
The Real Authority of the Liao Kingdom

TWO DAYS LATER, as night fell in Da’ze City, the thrumming music of a qin flowed from the governor’s official residence. At first, the notes sounded beautiful and sweet, but upon closer listening, they raised the hair on the back of one’s neck. Listening to this melody was like catching sight of a peerless beauty in splendid dress from afar, but realizing, upon a closer look, she was a ghost with both feet floating above the ground.

A green-clothed Liao Kingdom cultivator ran through the corridors toward the main hall where the qin music was coming from. Reaching the closed doors, he crossed his arms and called out, “Guoshi! The watchtower at the city outskirts has spotted Chonghua’s army approaching! They’ll reach Da’ze in half a shichen at most!”

There was no answer from within the hall. Orange lamplight shone through the white gauze at the windows. Only when that haunting song came to its delicate end did the great doors creak open.

The guoshi of the Liao Kingdom strolled over the threshold, entirely calm. An exquisite golden mask concealed his face, and his hair was fastened with a gold filigree crown. Though he had merely the rank of a state preceptor, he wore a set of lavish yellow robes embroidered with the dragon patterns reserved for the king. Those robes were edged in silver, with the designs stitched in silken thread refined from the tailfeathers of spiritual birds. Under the moonlight, the fabric rippled with a resplendent sheen.

“So soon?” The guoshi’s tone was unconcerned. “I’d have thought they’d need at least three days to make it here. Our taking Da’ze has certainly made the infant on Chonghua’s throne anxious.” He snickered. “Those righteous troops have so impatiently hurried over to confront us—you’d better go to the city walls and make proper preparations. We mustn’t disappoint our guests when they’ve come all this way.”

The messenger cultivator remained standing in place, his head bowed and arms crossed. Though the guoshi spoke amiably and looked cheerful

enough behind his mask, none of the messengers dared to lift their heads before him. Everyone in the Liao Kingdom down to children just learning to babble knew that in this dark country, the most terrifying authority was not the king, but the guoshi who sent him dancing like a puppet and mastered the court.

This man was cruel and capricious, his actions incomprehensible by any measure of reason or rule. To him, even the youthful ruler of the Liao Kingdom was a pile of mud he could kick aside at any moment, to say nothing of his lowly subjects.

In the days when the young king had just taken the throne, there had been a clan who thought to ally with the queen mother to take out this tyrant. But before the plot had gotten beyond first steps, the guoshi rendered the conspirators powerless and turned those disloyal subjects into mincemeat.

The king was devastated and ran, weeping in despair, to his mother for support. But on that same cold night, the guoshi paid a personal visit to the bedchamber of the Liao king's royal mother. As though testing the new king's courage, he debased the woman before the young man's eyes. Then, laughing madly, he cut off her head.

In the dark shadows of that luxurious bedchamber, the guoshi's robes hung lazily open, exposing a swath of sturdy chest. He dipped his fingers into the dead woman's still-warm blood and smiled as he smeared it over the King of Liao's face.

The king trembled and shook. The first emotion he expressed wasn't desire to avenge his mother, but naked fear: "Don't kill me… Don't kill me…"

The guoshi flashed an insincere smile, his tone unreadable. "Don't kill you? You certainly are a coward."

The young ruler sobbed. "Guoshi… Please… Please, I'm begging…"

"But that's not so bad." He examined the bloodstains on his fingertips, lips curving slightly. "Were you as daring as your mother, you might provide some entertainment, but keeping you would be like raising a tiger. It's better if you're a craven weakling."

Between this ruler and his subject, it was plain who held real power. A wealthy and prominent citizen of Liao had once directly admonished the guoshi along these lines, saying he should simply usurp the throne. The guoshi, however, had no such intentions.

“What’s so interesting about being king? It’s too tiring. The position of guoshi is better—far more tempting. All my life, I’ve wanted to be guoshi more than anything else.” The man smiled, syrupy sweet. “Don’t pressure me to take the throne. I’m a gentle creature; I don’t have such beastly aspirations.”

It was true that the guoshi didn’t aspire to beastliness: he was a flesh-eating and blood-sucking monster by nature. But he also loved to put on a show of gentility. When he lifted his head from his prey’s entrails with his mouth dripping blood, he would wear the sweetest smile.

All across the vast continent of the Nine Provinces, everyone knew the Liao Kingdom wasn’t ruled by the king, but his perverse guoshi. Here was the real master of this dark nation.

At this moment, the messenger official was serving this frightful man. Naturally he was aware of the risks of the post. This year alone, thirty-two messenger officials had met their end in the Liao Kingdom. Some of them didn’t know, even as their heads were struck off their shoulders, what they’d said to displease the guoshi so. Or perhaps the guoshi hadn’t been displeased at all. Perhaps he had merely wanted to take someone’s head off and nothing more.

“What are you staring at? Tell the troops outside the city gates to make preparations,” the guoshi ordered with a grin. “Is even such a minor task so beyond you? You need to disturb my qin-playing for this?”

The messenger felt hairs rise all over his body as he broke out in a cold sweat. “Yes, yes!” he cried hastily. “I-I’ll go at once! At once!”

He ran off in abject terror.

The guoshi watched his fearful retreat with a smile. He stood for a brief interval in the courtyard, then turned back into the main hall.

This hall had become something of a living purgatory. The corpse of the governor of Da’ze City, who’d slit his own throat, had yet to be removed. Neither had the bodies of the governor’s wife and five children,

who’d hung themselves as Liao took the city. The guoshi strolled through the hall, slender fingertips brushing the feet of those swaying corpses. His expression was so light and relaxed he might have been caressing wind chimes.

He loved this kind of atmosphere. To indulge his insane tastes, he still hadn’t allowed the corpses to be taken away, though he’d lived in the governor’s manor for two days now.

He walked to the end of the hall, where his guqin waited. Under the bright glow of the lamps, one could see this qin was made of human skin, strung with human hair, and studded with nine human eyes. Those eyes whirled wildly, flitting furiously to and fro.

The guoshi sat down at the guqin, strummed the strings, and closed his eyes as he resumed his playing.

“A lonely straw hut sits at Wanli Bridge, the Baihua Pool where I’ve made my home. Wind whispers through green bamboo, rain washes down on fragrant blooms. Successful old friends ignore my letters, while my son’s gaunt face drowns me in shame. These old bones will soon line a ditch, yet I laugh in madness wilder than my youth.”[4]

His fingers plucked the strings. First a lengthy song, then a leisurely song, a mournful song, a gentle song… By the time he played the first notes of a lullaby, the sounds of spells exploding could be heard in the distance.

After a long while—perhaps a shichen, perhaps two—a thundering boom shook the earth. Indistinct screaming rose from the far-off city walls. “Open the barriers! Open the defensive barriers!”

“Dispatch defense cultivators to the eastern gate!”

The roar of flames and screams of the dying burst from beyond the walls. By the time they reached the governor’s manor, they had splintered into incoherent noise further muddled by the music of the nine-eyed qin.

At the end of his song, the guoshi finally looked up. “They’re quick to lay siege, aren’t they,” he remarked. “Why don’t you go ask which generals of Chonghua came this time?”

The attendant at his side bowed his way out. In short order, he trotted back in and answered without looking up, “The brothers defending the

walls report that the commanding general is their Xihe-jun, Mo Xi!”

“Hardly a surprise,” the guoshi replied. “That Mo brat is fierce on the field; it’s only his shixiong he cannot face. Now that we’ve returned Gu Mang to them, deploying him here is expected. And his deputy general?”

“Murong Lian.”

The guoshi smiled. “An addict.”

“Th-there’s one more.”

“Oh? Who else?” the guoshi asked with rapt interest.

“Murong Mengze.”

The guoshi’s fingers paused over the qin. “Sending a woman as deputy general,” he sneered. “Is Chonghua on the verge of collapse or is their dear little emperor trying to get his sister some quality time with her beau? Murong Mengze… A healer with a withered core for deputy general… How many men did Chonghua give her?”

“Fifty thousand.”

The guoshi snickered. “Fifty thousand? Murong Mengze may know a few battle tactics, but her body is weak. Is she not afraid of dragging the others down? What thick skin that little girl has.”

“Just as the guoshi says.”

“Oh, that reminds me.” The guoshi paused. “What of Gu Mang? I hear his relationship with Mo Xi improves by the day; Mo Xi even took him back to his own manor as a servant. Will he be present for this battle?”

“General Gu—” Knowing he had erred, the attendant hastily corrected himself. “This subordinate misspoke, it’s G-Gu Mang—”

The guoshi smiled. “No harm done. If nothing else, he served our Great Liao for five years. Great Liao isn’t a stickler for rules like those stuffy men of Chonghua; if you wish to call him General Gu, go right ahead.”

But how could the attendant dare continue to call Gu Mang *General*? He hurriedly replied, “The guoshi is magnanimous in his forgiveness. According to information recently obtained by the Department of War, the emperor of Chonghua decreed Gu Mang a test subject for black magic

experimentation. When they finished, he was on the verge of death. Without the beneficence of an immortal ascended to the highest of heavens, or bathing in Divine Tincture of Life, he couldn't possibly have recovered sufficiently to come to the front lines."

Upon hearing this, the guoshi didn't relax at all. He narrowed his eyes, pupils flashing with a cryptic light. "Who said Chonghua doesn't have such an immortal? Isn't Jiang Fuli a holy sage capable of regrowing flesh and reviving the dead?" Mockery laced his words.

The attendant hastily answered, "The spy tailing Jiang Fuli said he went out traveling again. He isn't in Chonghua."

"His qinggong is strong; he's always been elusive. If he doesn't wish to be tracked, he'll escape no matter how closely he's followed," the guoshi said. "Of these enemy troops, we've no call to worry about Murong Lian or Murong Mengze. But keep an eye on Mo Xi. And…if there's anyone who resembles Gu Mang, even in the slightest, report it to me immediately."

"Yes sir!"

The guoshi swept his sleeves aside. "Go, then. Defend the city. I'll be in seclusion for the next three days. Afterward, I will personally come deal with these children."

The attendant nodded respectfully, quickly bowing and taking his leave.

The guoshi's fingertips returned to his qin strings. With a few gentle plucks, he resumed playing that drawn-out melody.

"Successful old friends ignore my letters, while my son's gaunt face drowns me in shame. These old bones will soon line a ditch, yet I laugh in madness wilder than my youth…"

The night deepened, and the distant shrieks of men and far-off boom of explosions rang clear through the air. Beyond the walls, the cultivators of Chonghua and the Liao Kingdom faced off. Blood flowed into rivers, yet in the depths of the city, within the governor's manor, the guoshi's qin music never faltered.

When the crescent moon hung high, sprinkling frost over the roof tiles, an oil lamp within the governor's manor burned to its end. A spray of

sparks burst from the wick as it winked out.

That manor filled with swaying corpses became still more devilish and eerie. In the sudden darkness, one could see that, behind a curtain of gauze an arm’s length from the guoshi, a ball of hazy light had been floating in midair all along.

That ball of light was dim, undiscernible in the lamplight. It hid in the corner, rising and falling, so frail it seemed it would disperse at any moment.

The guoshi looked up, his gaze darting from beneath his golden mask to land on the murky ball of light. His pearly teeth clicked as he whispered, “Look, Jingchen. I’ve coddled you for so long. Will you still not wake?”

That glowing ball called Jingchen flickered weakly and darkened once more.

The guoshi narrowed his eyes. “There must be a limit to your willfulness,” he said, low. “Recover soon and come back with me. If you fall into the hands of these men from Chonghua, that herd of hypocrites certainly wouldn’t understand you like I do. You don’t want to be sealed again, do you? Be good—wake up now.”

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Chapter 143:
Sharing a Bed

ON THE OUTSKIRTS of Da’ze City, as the first rays of dawn pierced the clouds and the rosy glow of sunrise spilled over the earth, the opening battle came to an end.

The ancient frontier city emerged from the morning mist. After soaking in a blood bath all night, it looked like a massive and exhausted beast, lying on its side upon the sprawling earth. The torn-up tiles were its abraded flesh, the moat, dyed red, like fresh blood flowing in gouts from its wounds. Piled-up corpses—both the soldiers of the Liao army and the cultivators of Chonghua, heaped atop one another in disarray—were scattered beneath Da’ze’s city wall like ants.

This was only the first battle. No one would come collect their brothers’ remains while the war still raged. Mo Xi and Gu Mang had long since grown used to the sight, but it still left them bone-weary.

“General Mo, are we withdrawing?”

“Our enemy reacted swiftly. They took heavy losses last night, but their secondary defensive line adjusted their tactics to fight us to an impasse within an hour.” Mo Xi shook his head. “After the long march here and a night’s hard battle, the cultivators of Chonghua are exhausted. Pressing the fight would only be to our disadvantage. Rest the troops. Retreat and make camp, and we’ll treat our injuries and recover.”

“Yes sir!”

On their commander’s orders, the cultivators of Chonghua withdrew a safe distance from the city walls. They constructed barriers and dug trenches, preparing to recover their strength.

Mo Xi made his way to the commander’s tent. Several of his personal guards were bustling about the bed and desk, Gu Mang among them. In order to make his disguise less conspicuous, Mo Xi had instructed all his attendants on this campaign to wear masks.

The frontier wind buffeted the tent flaps. Mo Xi strode in and surveyed the busy cultivators. “There’s no need for so many people to be straightening up in here. You may go.” After a pause, he turned to Gu Mang. “You stay behind; that’ll be enough.”

The other personal guards filed out. When the flaps fell behind the last of them, Mo Xi stepped over to Gu Mang’s side and reached up to remove his mask. “Everyone’s gone; you don’t need to wear this in here.”

“You’re not afraid of anyone seeing me?” Gu Mang asked.

“Not at all,” Mo Xi replied. He turned to place the mask on the bedside table before stepping forward to fold Gu Mang into his arms. Sensing Gu Mang’s unease, he sighed. “I’m just teasing you; I set a defensive barrier outside the tent. No one’s coming in without my permission.”

He pressed his chin to Gu Mang’s forehead, then leaned down to kiss the top of Gu Mang’s head, raising a hand to caress his hair. “I’m sorry,” he said softly. “It’s your army, but you can’t lead them yourself. You have to leave it to this stepdad who’s fumbling along.”

Gu Mang looked down at the ground and smiled. “The Northern Frontier Army has completely transformed. If I really did return now, *I’d* be the stepdad. Besides, between the two of us, what difference is there? Your leadership isn’t lacking in the slightest. But—there is one thing.”

“Hm?”

“I can’t always stay hidden by your side, can I? Mo Xi, I should be out there making myself useful.”

Mo Xi wasn’t at all surprised to hear this. He had known Gu Mang would say it sooner or later, in the same way he knew that even if Gu Mang were given a chance to turn back the clock, he would still choose to walk the same thorny path. This man, with his gentle gaze, had a heart more resolute than anyone’s.

“You’ll have a mission, but not quite yet. You won’t be able to complete it before our second battle at least.” He looked down and met Gu Mang’s faintly disappointed gaze. After a moment, he added, “Could I trouble Shixiong to wait a little longer?”

When Mo Xi put it like *that*, there wasn't much Gu Mang could say in reply. The two of them had been toiling all night and were just as exhausted as the rest of the Northern Frontier Army. "You should sleep while you can," Mo Xi said.

"What about you?"

"I'll look at the sand table a little longer."

"You need to take care of yourself." Gu Mang lifted a hand to poke Mo Xi's broad chest. "Get some rest when you're done. Gege will wait for you in bed."

At that last sentence, Mo Xi coughed rather awkwardly. Watching him feign calm, Gu Mang snickered to himself. This man had performed all sorts of wanton acts with Gu Mang in the face of death, yet he still blushed to the tips of his ears at his shixiong's unabashed teasing.

Oh, this little shidi of his… He was too damn lovable.

Mo Xi reset the sand table many times, laying out troop formations, barrier placement, and planned maneuvers again and again. By the time he turned around after poring over his battle plans, Gu Mang had fallen fast asleep on the army cot.

The commanding general's cot wasn't much wider than anyone else's. But Gu Mang was in the habit of curling into one corner of the bed as he slept, as if terrified to encroach on someone else's territory. The lowliest, most beastly instinct in his bones expressed itself in such a pitiable yet adorable manner.

After watching him intently for several minutes, Mo Xi rose to wash and bathe. When he returned, Gu Mang hadn't moved from where he lay, curled up like a kitten.

Mo Xi sat gingerly on the edge of the bed. He made no noise; there was only the slight dip of the bedding under his weight. Mo Xi climbed into bed with his clothes neatly fastened and his hands solemnly folded over his stomach. Closing his eyes, he slept.

At heart, Mo Xi was a self-disciplined person. When he had been mired in a thick fog, unaware of the truth, he had succumbed to irritation and fury—but his loss of control then didn't reflect his true temperament.

Since resolving his misunderstandings and sharing such a hard-won sincerity with his beloved, he only worried wholeheartedly for Gu Mang's health.

Many other men would have craved immediate sexual gratification when they took possession of a lost lover once more. Mo Xi was unlike them—he only wished for Gu Mang to be well. It didn't matter how long his memories remained or his mind stayed clear. Mo Xi wanted him to be healthy, and treated him with care.

Unfortunately, men's bodies rarely aligned with their minds. Around noon, Mo Xi hazily woke from a deep slumber to find that, at some point, Gu Mang had turned over and curled up in his arms. What was more pressing was that the bathrobe Gu Mang had carelessly thrown on before sleep had been pulled loose, snowy white lapels exposing a broad swath of sturdy chest. One bare leg had even draped itself over Mo Xi's body.

Mo Xi's breath caught in his throat; his heart pounded. The scene was so reminiscent of the days of their youth, before Mo Xi had revealed his true feelings to Gu Mang. Back then, Gu Mang had also liked to cling to him in his sleep. Or perhaps it was because Lu Zhanxing had started fooling around with a pretty female cultivator in the camp.

In those days, Gu Mang shared a tent with Lu Zhanxing. One evening, Gu Mang had leisurely made his way back to their tent, gnawing on an apple. When he lifted the flap, the sight greeting him was one of his own half-dressed brother tangled with a woman on his cot.

Gu Mang very nearly choked to death on that mouthful of fruit, his face flushing redder than the apple. He dropped the curtain and broke into a run.

Even after Lu Zhanxing chased after him apologizing again and again —"Aiya it's all my fault, I forgot to set a barrier," and "Aiya, Mang-er, I thought you said you wouldn't be back tonight"—none of it was any use. Despite Gu Mang's charade as an incurable womanizer, at that point he had, in fact, never even been kissed. Seeing such a carnal act at such close quarters and involving his own brother too—it was a shock too severe. Gu Mang had laughed it off and said it was fine, but he'd broken into goosebumps all over.

He began to dread returning to his own tent, terrified of coming across such a scandalous scene once more. But he couldn’t very well go without sleep. After some thought, he sought shelter with the most virtuous and reliable of all his brothers.

It was with this kind of mentality that Gu Mang happily tumbled into Mo Xi’s bed.

Mo Xi refused to allow it. Each excuse he gave was stranger than the last—

“I’m a clean freak.”

“I’ll bathe,” said Gu Mang.

“My bed is too small.”

“It’s big enough for two.”

“I’m not accustomed to sharing.”

“A little practice and you’ll get used to it.”

“I toss and turn; I might beat you up in my sleep.”

“Aiyo, is it that bad?”

“Yes.”

“Then Gege absolutely must sleep with you, to help you correct this awful habit.”

This reply rendered Mo Xi completely speechless.

Gu Mang coaxed and pestered him, shoving his way into Mo Xi’s bed. In the end, Mo Xi was helpless against his campaign of harassment. He let Gu Mang take most of his wooden cot, while he slept with his face pressed up against the wall.

When Gu Mang saw Mo Xi preparing for bed with his clothes fastened and his hair neatly tied, orderly, aloof, and virtuous, he heaved a sigh of relief. He was convinced he’d chosen well with this self-disciplined, untouchable beauty. Someone like this would never be caught in such an improper act as fooling around with random female cultivators.

Of course, Gu Mang had no idea what kind of desire raced through this untouchable beauty’s heart. If that ardor were to be released, it would

be more than enough to burn anyone, to crush them into shattered scraps. And this desire was born because of him; it yearned to pour into his body like a flood.

Gu Mang slept very soundly during that time, far from the nightmare his Lu-ge had visited upon him. Instead, the great Mo-gongzi was visited with incomparably lewd spring dreams.

Mo Xi hardly slept; he didn't dare turn over. It was winter, and he was naturally warm while Gu Mang didn't like the cold. After Gu Mang fell asleep, he always unconsciously pressed closer to Mo Xi and wrapped his limbs around him. Many years later, Mo Xi still vividly remembered those long nights—the snowy northern wind whistling outside, and the pitch-black darkness inside. Beneath the thick blanket, Gu Mang curled up sweetly in sleep, one arm slung over Mo Xi's waist from behind, his soft cheek pressed against his back. From time to time, he had nuzzled against him as he dreamed.

In those days, Gu Mang had truly believed that Young Master Mo was indifferent and aloof. He never realized the kind of willpower this apparently dispassionate young man was exerting to suppress his wild hunger—his beastly desire to turn over, pin Gu Mang to the bed, and devour him. Gu Mang merely noticed that Mo Xi either woke up much earlier than him, or else was only willing to get up after he left the tent. He refused to get up at the same time no matter what.

Mo Xi also seemed to have come down with some sort of chronic inflammation.[5] Either those pretty eyes were spiderwebbed with red, or there was a sore on those thin lips. He looked as if he hadn't slept in weeks, with bruises under his eyes that could only come from persistent insomnia.

Upon noticing Mo Xi's condition, Gu Mang had asked Lu Zhanxing with deep concern, "Am I really such a restless sleeper? Have I been assaulting him in my dreams?"

In the present moment, as Mo Xi gazed at the slumbering Gu Mang, eyes sweeping across his shixiong's gentle features and his loosened lapels…he felt that it was all so much like the past.

At his most idealistic, he'd imagined that in the future, he and his Gu-shixiong could forever entrust their hearts to one another, entangling lives

and bodies without end.

At his most pessimistic, he'd imagined capturing the traitorous monster, locking him within his residence, and tormenting him to his death.

The only thing he hadn't imagined was that, after so long, when they had experienced so much, he would relearn the feeling of watching his shixiong lying by his side and being too afraid to carelessly touch him. Upon this bed, things seemed to have returned to when they were still young and untried. More than a decade of elapsed time, that ocean of bloody chaos, seemed to be written off in one stroke.

Mo Xi's heart burned. He looked at Gu Mang with a gaze so tender and so fierce. Neither the love he felt nor the desire that pricked him had lessened in the least.

"General Mo!"

A personal guard's shout cut through the silence. "The canteen's prepared meals, and the brothers have already been sent down. You can go to the main tent to take your meal now!"

The cultivator had raised his voice to be heard in the tent. Before Mo Xi had a chance to shush him, Gu Mang woke up. His blue eyes opened, and ten years of time returned to their bodies in an instant.

"Mngh…"

"It's noon," Mo Xi said softly, his voice slightly hoarse. "We can eat."

"Sleepy." Gu Mang blinked blearily, yawning and wriggling deeper into Mo Xi's arms. "Just a little longer…"

The bed was only so big. Mo Xi was caught off guard, but he didn't have anywhere to hide even if he wanted to. When Gu Mang pressed close and felt that familiar hardness, Mo Xi froze in deep embarrassment.

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Chapter 144:
Entangling Like Before

AFTER A BEAT OF SILENCE, Mo Xi sat up. “You sleep, I’ll go first—”

Gu Mang pulled him lazily back down before he finished speaking. Gu Mang’s hair-knot was loose, soft inky locks framing his pale face. He propped himself upon Mo Xi’s sturdy chest, one hand around Mo Xi’s wrist as he gazed at him through heavy-lidded blue eyes. Gu Mang’s mood was much better than it had been, possibly because he had finally returned to the battlefields he knew so well and could fight for his homeland under a new identity. “Oh? Are you going to go out like this?” he teased, grinning with his canines peeking out.

“…Let go,” Mo Xi replied.

“Won’t they see?”

On the pillow, Mo Xi turned his face away, refusing to look at him. His elegant and handsome face flushed pink. “Shut up,” he said quietly.

Gu Mang laughed, leaning over him. Mo Xi’s lashes were so long they looked exactly like dandelion fluff when they fluttered; Gu Mang wanted to blow on them. “Didn’t you say you’d treat me kindly?” he grinned. “Look at you, being a meanie again.”

Mo Xi’s eyes widened. It had been too long since he’d experienced his shixiong’s shamelessness. Look how Gu Mang had teased him first, then turned around to accuse Mo Xi of being mean. Outrageous.

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Watching his phoenix eyes framed by those dark lashes, Gu Mang couldn’t hold himself back. He dipped down and blew on them for real. Mo Xi instinctively closed his eyes and turned aside, exasperated. “Gu Mang, could you not—”

The words turned into a muted groan. While his eyes were shut, Gu Mang had swung a leg over him to straddle his waist. As he leaned down to kiss Mo Xi on the cheek, he simultaneously wrapped his fingers around Mo Xi’s burgeoning erection.

Mo Xi’s eyes flew wider still. Pupils dark, he stared at Gu Mang with a mix of astonishment and unease. The jut of his throat bobbed as he warned at a low growl, “Don’t mess around. Your injuries—”

“They’re pretty much healed,” Gu Mang replied. “The faewolf blood tempering wasn’t for nothing.”

“*Pretty much* isn’t good enough. If you relapse, Jiang Fuli isn’t here to help.”

Gu Mang bent down, pressing their foreheads together. “If you keep repressing yourself like this and end up with some kind of personality disorder, Jiang Fuli isn’t here to help with that either.”

“…Gu Mang!”

Gu Mang, of course, ignored him—it wasn’t as if Mo Xi would kick him off the bed. But Mo Xi’s gaze was distracted and anxious; beyond that flicker of desire, his eyes were an ocean of worry.

Gu Mang sighed and straightened, gathering his hair into a loose bun. “Really—if you don’t believe it, why don’t I show you?” At this, he slid his white robe down over his shoulders.

It wasn’t the first time Mo Xi had seen Gu Mang’s bare torso since he returned to Chonghua. But the previous occasions had been accompanied by rage, shock, grief, and other intense emotions, or the light had been dim. He had never closely examined Gu Mang’s body.

Old scars indeed made up the majority of the marks on Gu Mang’s physique. Though traces of his newer wounds remained, they were quickly disappearing.

“I can’t remember all the details, but the faewolf the Liao Kingdom infused into my blood was probably similar to the Demonblood Beast,” Gu Mang explained. “Don’t the stories say the Demonblood Beast is an immortal monster? As long as it’s unsealed, its flesh and soul will reassemble even centuries after its demise—it’ll rise like a phoenix from the ashes.”

“That’s just a legend,” Mo Xi replied.

“Right, no one knows if it’s true, since no one’s ever lived for centuries.” As Gu Mang spoke, he took hold of Mo Xi’s hand. “But the regenerative properties of the Demonblood Beast are real, and the faewolf the Liao Kingdom made in its likeness possesses the same kind of ability. They tempered its blood into me, so…”

He brought Mo Xi’s lightly callused hand to his own cool skin. The scars from Sishu Terrace were still visible but barely registered to the touch. “I’m the same,” Gu Mang said softly.

Beneath Mo Xi’s fingertips was lean muscle. Gu Mang took his hand, moving it to caress every inch of his body. Mo Xi couldn’t name what he felt: slight reassurance or even greater heartache. The wounds Gu Mang had received were fast disappearing, it was true—but if his body retained few scars, perhaps the suffering Gu Mang had endured was far deeper than the eye could see.

“But these old scars are staying,” Gu Mang said. “Like the ones from fighting with Murong Lian when I was younger, and a few others…” he murmured, touching his shoulder.

On his left shoulder was that petal-shaped mark. Whether it had been there since birth or was from some injury he sustained as a child, even Gu Mang himself didn’t know.

“Honestly I’ve always thought these scars were pretty ugly. It would be nice if they would disappear,” Gu Mang said. “Too bad the faewolf blood can only heal wounds from after the tempering. It doesn’t affect ones from before.” He rubbed at his arms and the sword scars on his chest. “They’re awful…”

In answer, Mo Xi pulled him down into his arms and captured those soft lips. Between tender kisses, he murmured, “What are you thinking?

However many scars you have, they're all beautiful."

Gu Mang's limbs went weak from those kisses. As their tongues tangled, wet and hot, their mutual lust could no longer be held back.

But Mo Xi was no longer that youth who had just come of age; his mind was still clear. He knew his Gu Mang-gege always indulged him, telling him *It's fine* and *This is great* and *Don't worry*. Gu Mang had been like this when they were first together, and now was no different. Ten years ago, Mo Xi had taken it as truth. That silly youth heedlessly poured all of his strength and passion into his shige's body.

Ten years on, Mo Xi was wiser. That silly youth had become a hero, a pillar of Chonghua—and had grown into a man his Gu Mang-gege could no longer so easily deceive.

Mo Xi turned Gu Mang over onto his stomach. "Press your legs together," he said lowly.

Mind made hazy by Mo Xi's kisses, Gu Mang did as instructed, lying atop the bedding. After a moment, he felt Mo Xi's weight bear down on him, followed by a hot and hard length shoving between his thighs. Though Mo Xi hadn't actually penetrated him, the feeling of him thrusting between Gu Mang's legs was intense enough to make his scalp prickle.

"Relax, don't worry."

Mo Xi retrieved some wound salve from the head of the bed and spread it between Gu Mang's legs for lubrication. Facedown, Gu Mang murmured, "Where'd you learn this trick?"

Silence. Just as Gu Mang thought he'd say something like *I came up with it on my own*, he heard Mo Xi reply with: "That present you gave me."

It was a moment before realization struck. "Holy shit, you don't mean that porn booklet?"

Mo Xi didn't reply. He reached out to cover the back of Gu Mang's hand where it clutched the bedding and wrapped his other hand around Gu Mang's waist, chest pressed against Gu Mang's graceful shoulders, pinning him down. He began to slowly move between Gu Mang's thighs.

At first, Gu Mang still pestered and needled him. "That one I gave you when you came of age? Didn't you say you were going to light it on

fire? And that you'd close down that bookstall? You little…ngh…*ah*…"

He couldn't speak anymore. Each one of Mo Xi's long strokes brushed his entrance, and the salve had smeared everywhere, becoming slick heat between his burning thighs. As Mo Xi held him down and ground against him, Gu Mang could no longer tell if the wetness was from the salve, or if it was his tempered body's uncontrollable reaction.

Mo Xi reached down and took Gu Mang's erect cock in hand. Electricity arced up his spine, and the sensation of Mo Xi thrusting between his thighs became all the more vivid. Try as he might to restrain himself, Mo Xi's passion blazed ever higher, his thrusts growing more intense, his breathing deeper. Several times Gu Mang felt Mo Xi pressed up against his slick entrance—he merely needed to push forward to fuck him for real.

This unresolved tension was tortuous; Gu Mang didn't know if Mo Xi was trying to cherish or torment him. Or perhaps such torment was irrevocably involved in cherishing someone. There would always be things one would yearn after but could not ask for, and things one could ask for but could not rush. Gu Mang lay on the bed as the bamboo cushion shifted beneath them, half of it crooked and slipping down, the entire cot creaking as it swayed in time with their low gasps.

When Gu Mang came, Mo Xi had inadvertently pressed his cock against his soft entrance as he thrust intently between his thighs. Only then did he discover Gu Mang's hole was soaking wet, clenching hungrily. The instant the head of Mo Xi's cock breached him, even slightly, Gu Mang couldn't hold back a hoarse cry. The sensation drove him to shudder as he came all over the mat.

His body sagged, pathetically limp. Gu Mang's blue eyes misted over; he was on the verge of weeping. "In…side…"

"Gu Mang…"

"I can't bear it… Please…get, get inside me…"

Perhaps it was the demon blood again—Gu Mang wasn't anywhere near satisfied after he came; his need only grew sharper. He rubbed himself against Mo Xi's cock, back arching, deliriously wishing for Mo Xi to possess him totally.

Mo Xi took a deep breath. A vein pulsed at his temple; his throat was terribly dry. Even his eyes seemed to have been burned red by desire. He watched Gu Mang begging beneath him, his shixiong's skin flushed the pink of peach-blossom wine. Those azure eyes were half-lidded, overflowing with yearning.

Once the lust of a demon beast was awakened, it was near impossible to contain. When he'd fucked Gu Mang on Bat Island, he'd thought it entirely the effect of Wuyan's incense. Now he could see it wasn't so. Wuyan's aphrodisiac had an amplifying effect, but the desire of demons in heat was inherently this intense.

Gu Mang was almost sobbing. "Mo Xi… I…I can't take it anymore…" He swallowed hard, the ends of his eyes red. "I…want you…"

Mo Xi's full cockhead was still flush against Gu Mang's entrance. Gu Mang seemed to be afraid he might pull away. He turned his head, gentle eyes brimming with tears as he turned that imploring gaze on Mo Xi. Heat pooled in Mo Xi's stomach. He found himself taking a deep breath as he gripped Gu Mang's sturdy waist.

He scooped another two fingers of salve from the container and smeared it over where they were joined. It was hardly necessary; Gu Mang's hole was already a mess of slick. Mo Xi propped himself upright with one hand, veins standing out on his strong forearm. He rubbed the salve over his own cock, then bent low to kiss Gu Mang's cheek.

"I'll be gentle. If it hurts, you have to tell me. Mm?"

Gu Mang turned and kissed Mo Xi's soft lips, fiercely pressing their mouths together, tongues tangling. At being kissed so passionately, so brazenly, Mo Xi's breathing roughened further. He took hold of his achingly hard cock and thrust forward fiercely.

"Ah—!"

With a wet noise followed by a slick slide, the head of Mo Xi's cock drove in, its length fever-hot as it sank to its full depth inside him. Gu Mang arched his neck with a sharp gasp of surprise. Mo Xi's only thought was the sensation of that wet heat sucking him in, the intense pleasure that flickered up his spine and threatened to overwhelm him. He panted roughly, then began to snap his hips, thrusting into that soft hole again and again.

The moment Mo Xi started moving, Gu Mang's self-control failed—not because of pain, but pleasure. He cried out: "Mo…*ah*…Mo Xi…"

"I'm here," Mo Xi replied hoarsely.

"Ngh…*aah*…" The force of Mo Xi's thrusts sent Gu Mang's body shuddering as Mo Xi pinned him beneath his bulk. The hair at his brow was in disarray, his pretty blue eyes glassy. He moaned, calling Mo Xi's name. He made no declarations of love, nor speak any sweet words. Just the sound of his name made Mo Xi's heart burn, made him buck forward more wildly.

"Deeper… Hngh… Right, right there… Ah…*aahhhh*…"

They had been lovers so many years; Mo Xi knew precisely where Gu Mang was most sensitive, where to fuck him so he'd cry, so he'd start shivering from pleasure. He aimed for the nerves in the deepest part of him. As soon as he thrust against that spot, Gu Mang's legs buckled; he was incapable of anything but whimpering beneath Mo Xi, the heat of his body sucking his cock tightly in, clenching down again and again.

"Mmph… Fuck me… Mo Xi…"

Mo Xi flipped him over, kissing his berry-red lips and sealing his sobs between their mouths. Their hearts thundered, the warmth around them building to a terrifying heat. What had any of this world to do with them: they needed neither time, nor hatred, nor sins, nor a new dawn. They were like those two youths from more than ten years ago in their first bloom of love, who had wanted only to entangle with their beloved like this for all of eternity.

The second time he came, Gu Mang wrapped his arms around Mo Xi's neck, so overcome he'd begun to cry.

Mo Xi heard Gu Mang call his name and many other things—shidi, princess, brother. All the ties that had bound them, as long as they were good, Gu Mang bestowed those names upon him in murmurs amid the throes of passion. As if making up for every sincere confession missing from their fourteen years of love, all at once.

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Chapter 145:
Affection and Gratitude

"HEY HEY, did you hear that around noon today?"

At dusk, as the generals gathered for their meeting in the main tent, a few idle cultivators stood whispering together.

"Are you talking about…*those* noises coming from General Mo's tent?"

"Yes! You heard it too? I thought there was something wrong with my ears!"

"I dunno… No one dared get too close to General Mo's tent. It was probably something else. In any case, it's *General Mo*." The cultivator licked his lips awkwardly. "How many battlefields have we fought on together? We know what kind of person he is. He wouldn't fool around with any girl in the camp."

Everyone thought this very reasonable. But, soon after, someone else spoke up quietly. "You're not wrong, but don't forget—isn't Princess Mengze here too?"

As soon as he mentioned this, many widened their eyes in realization.

"So that's how it is!"

"But has their relationship really progressed that far?"

"Probably not…"

"Why not! Xiao-Hua from the neighboring camp told me not too long ago he ran into General Mo and Princess Mengze flirting in

an alley during the Dragon Boat Festival! Princess Mengze was dressed as a man and even wore a mask, but Xiao-Hua caught them as they were just about to kiss. General Mo was super alert and hid Princess Mengze's face right away! *Tsk*, that protective instinct is really something."

The crowd exclaimed in astonishment at every sentence. Almost all these nosy cultivators were now convinced Princess Mengze had paid a

visit to Mo Xi's tent at noon and had a roll in the sheets with him.

"Even by conservative estimates, they were making noise for at least a shichen, right? Stepdad's really got it."

"But the princess is in such poor health—is she okay?"

Some of these cultivators had so much time on their hands they felt compelled to voice their deepest concerns. "Does His Imperial Majesty know about this? Our stepdad's not doing this the right way; he hasn't even married her, yet he took her to bed. Awful."

"What if the princess gets with child…"

Within the main tent, Gu Mang was sitting by the wall with his golden mask on. He let out a low sneeze.

The generals were discussing strategies for the next battle, and a sizable crowd had gathered. As an unremarkable little attendant, Gu Mang had found himself a similarly unremarkable corner. But when he looked up after sneezing, he saw Mo Xi standing with his arms crossed by the sand table, gazing at him from across the tent.

Gu Mang's face burned, and his heart felt warmer. The room was filled with people; before the sand table, Murong Lian chewed on the mouthpiece of his pipe as he gave his insights, while Princess Mengze, in gold-trimmed black with her hair tied in a gold ribbon, stood to the side and intently listened. The squadron leaders and troop commanders were likewise gathered around the sand table peering at the diagrams, along with the attendants each officer brought.

Yet Mo Xi had specifically looked at him over the heads of so many, just because of a sneeze.

Under all those watching eyes, Gu Mang suddenly felt timid. He wanted to gaze back at Mo Xi but was terrified someone might notice.

He had little chance to ponder it—Mengze quickly refuted Murong Lian's strategy. Using only two squadrons, she broke through Murong Lian's line of attack. Murong Lian bit down on the mouthpiece of his pipe, squinting as he surveyed the sand table. In the end, he said, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. I concede."

Mengze flashed him a rueful smile. "Lian-ge, my apologies."

Murong Lian snorted.

Mo Xi was next. He looked away from Gu Mang and walked straight to the sand table. He scanned the aftermath of Murong Lian's simulation and dipped his head in thought. After rearranging a few of the flags that represented his forces, he began to outline his plan of attack.

It was the first time Gu Mang had seen Mo Xi devise battle plans as a commander. When Gu Mang had ostensibly defected, Mo Xi was young; though he had experience leading troops, none of the battles he'd fought were major ones. After Gu Mang left, Mo Xi had slowly come into his own, yet they had been nemeses all those years.

"On the left flank: the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion will set up healing barriers, leaving two hundred healers to provide support where I've placed this blue flag." Lowering his long lashes, Mo Xi took the two blue flags Murong Lian had placed at the southern peak and moved them to the shores of the lake on the city's outskirts. "Three thousand soldiers from the Northern Frontier Army will join these healers, using Xuanwu Formations and Demon-Repelling Arrays."

Gu Mang leaned against the wall farthest from Mo Xi. Quietly, he watched this man become the focal point of the entire room, listened as he meticulously plotted the entire battle. Once it had been Gu Mang who stood there. Mo Xi had taken his place to become the sturdy pillar of the Northern Frontier Army. Nothing, Gu Mang felt, could be better than this.

It was just that…he had the vague feeling lately that his memories were disappearing faster than ever. How much longer could he watch Mo Xi like this?

"Hey, you—yes, you." Someone had barged into the tent and called out to Gu Mang in a low voice.

Gu Mang was taken by surprise. "You're looking for me? What is it?"

"You're Xihe-jun's personal attendant, aren't you? The escort official with the magical weapons and talismans from the capital has arrived. I'll trouble you to settle the delivery."

Gu Mang turned to glance back at Mo Xi. Due to the level of detail in his explanation and the inherent trickiness of the strategy, many of the

onlookers had stepped closer to surround the sand table. From where Gu Mang stood, he could no longer see his Mo-shidi's face clearly; he only glimpsed slivers of his profile through the gaps.

Melancholy crept over him—yet there was some comfort in it too. He'd known for many years that things would turn out like this. Even when he'd watched Mo Xi sitting underneath the academy's trees, studiously reading his scroll, he'd known there'd come a day when Mo Xi would be the one at the center of the crowd. His dearest treasure was shining bright. It was a beautiful sight.

Gu Mang turned and stepped out of the tent to attend to the newcomer's request. The former commander of the Northern Frontier Army was now so insignificant that no one noticed him slipping quietly away.

Mo Xi was so engrossed in his explanation that it was full dark by the time he finished. Yet the crowd hadn't found it tedious to listen; in fact, his plan was ingenious. Many of them felt cold sweat soaking the backs of their robes as they witnessed his elaborately interlocked schemes.

When he had finished going over the entire siege, a few of the squadron leaders let out heavy breaths.

"How terrifying…"

"Stepdad really has guts…"

The war council was dismissed. Everyone made their way back to their tents, exchanging whispers with those walking alongside them.

While Mo Xi had been speaking, he had been entirely focused on the task at hand. It was only after he finished talking and sat down that a belated wave of exhaustion washed over him. He brought a hand to his forehead, slowly kneading at his brow as his audience trickled out of the main tent. Even if they thought his plan was impeccable, and no one at the scene was capable of breaking his assault formation, Mo Xi still felt he could further minimize losses. Thus, he remained sitting before the table, planning to rest a little before running through the strategy once more on his own.

Hand over his brow, he heard the sound of tea being poured nearby. A moment later, a hot cup was placed next to him.

By this point, everyone else had gone. Who else but Gu Mang would have stayed behind to keep him company without saying a word? Wearily closing his eyes, he said, “Sorry—things were hectic earlier, so I didn’t get a chance to look over at you. What tea did you make?”

“Lingshan Miaoyu.”

Mo Xi’s eyes flew open, his expression shifting slightly as he looked up. “Mengze…”

Mengze smiled warmly. “Of course you were busy at the sand table earlier. I was focused on it too. Why would I be angry at you for not looking at me?”

This misunderstanding was rather dire, but there was no way Mo Xi could explain it—what was he supposed to say? *The person I wanted to see wasn’t you, it was the attendant who’s been at my side?* He would be pushing Gu Mang right into the fire.

Mengze’s eyes glimmered, as if his gentle words had given her hope. After a pause, Mo Xi replied, “It’s grown late, and we’ll be launching our second attack tomorrow. You should go back and rest.”

“But I want to stay with you.” Mo Xi was about to interject, but Mengze held up a hand. “I know what you’re going to say—you’re going to tell me to mind my reputation, to stop following you around all the time… or you’ll say you have no affection for me whatsoever, and I shouldn’t misunderstand.”

Mo Xi blinked, at a loss.

Mengze bent her slender neck. Though still composed, sorrow surfaced in her gaze. “You’ve said those things to me for so many years; I’ve memorized them all. I’m aware you feel gratitude toward me and nothing more. I’m not asking for anything else. Won’t you even let me look at you, or spend a little time at your side?”

“If you’re always looking at me and spending time with me, you’ll never see the people you should be seeing,” said Mo Xi.

Mengze looked up, her eyes glistening with watery light. “You needn’t worry on my behalf. I’m more than capable of choosing whom I wish to look at and whom I spend my time with. I won’t regret it, no matter how it ends. And I won’t ask for that person to return my gaze. But I just want to know, Dage…is there someone else in your heart now?”

Mo Xi didn’t expect she would ask so directly. He was briefly speechless. Setting aside his untouched teacup, he looked up. “There has always been.”

Mengze had anticipated these words, but still she flinched. Only after a long silence did she smile with difficulty, her face bone-white. “It’s true that…when you previously rejected my advances…you told me you wouldn’t come to like me. It’s just that I, I…” Her voice faltered, her words growing shaky.

She didn’t need to continue for Mo Xi to understand. He had made himself clear to her long ago; he had said there was no room for anyone else in his heart. But how could Mengze believe it? She had simply taken it as a rote rejection. After all, he’d never been close with any other maiden, and he couldn’t outright say the person he’d given his whole heart to was Gu Mang.

No one would’ve believed Mo Xi back then when he said his heart belonged to another. It was only in recent days, when the suggestive clues became harder and harder to hide, that Mo Xi’s words finally seemed plausible.

Mengze braced herself against the table’s edge, catching her breath for a moment before forcing a smile. “Which aristocratic daughter is it? How…how did you hide it from everyone for so long…”

“Not an aristocrat.”

Mengze’s face paled further. “Is she…a commoner?”

Mo Xi truly didn’t know how to answer.

In the silence, Mengze’s gaze swept up to the ribbon binding Mo Xi’s hair. That ribbon he’d worn by mistake had been swapped out long ago; this man cared so little about such trifles he’d never even realized he’d tied his hair with a ribbon that wasn’t his.

“Dage,” Mengze whispered, “you’re of a *noble line*.”

Mo Xi clasped his hands on the table, looking up at her.

“Do you really think you can be with an ordinary maiden?” Mengze asked, sadness in her voice. “I won’t say more right now, but think of the late Wangshu-jun. There are so many terrible precedents. You…you grew up in the imperial city; you must know…”

“Do you think the late Wangshu didn’t know?” Mo Xi asked.

“Then you should at least think of what happened to him!”

Mo Xi stilled for a moment. He heaved a sigh. “Mengze, thank you for your advice. But this matter between us is ours alone. I’ll do anything to protect that person.”

Mengze was silent.

“Because I love them.”

Mengze’s eyes were damp. Mo Xi rose to his feet, then continued. “I will also protect you.”

“Why?” Mengze asked through tears.

“Because I’m grateful to you.”

Mengze closed her eyes and smiled bitterly.

“I told you long ago that I owe you a life,” said Mo Xi. “If at any point you have need of me, I will do all in my power to aid you.” Mo Xi pursed his lips. “But my heart is not mine to give.”

Mengze looked up again, her voice shaking as she asked: “And you’ll never change your mind?”

Mo Xi knew how humiliating it must be for an imperial daughter to ask such a question, but this wasn’t a case where pity could change the outcome. He met her gaze. “I will not.”

The silence stretched. In the stifling stillness, what fell from Mengze’s lips was a light and wretched laugh. She looked up and said thickly, “All right…all right…”

She didn’t keep pushing. Or perhaps she had already done and said all she could over the past few years. “Oh, Mo-dage… I almost wish you’d

lied a little. I wouldn’t mind being deceived. But you won’t even let me hold onto my dream. You really… You really…”

She didn’t know how to end this conversation that was, to her, a crushing defeat. She wanted to smile, to collect her dignity that had shattered upon the floor, but tears brimmed in her eyes. She opened them wide, trying her best to hold them back.

Then, she turned, slowly, almost staggeringly, and left the main tent.

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Chapter 146:
Murong Lian's Strange Behavior

DA'ZE WAS A RAINY CITY. By the time Gu Mang was done checking over the rations at the barracks, the sky had begun to darken. Black clouds gathered on the horizon, pressing toward the city outskirts. Gu Mang sent the cultivators who had brought the rations to rest, then ordered men to cover the sacks of grain with oilcloth.

The wind was howling as the cultivators hurried to pin down the four corners of the oilcloth before the downpour. Gu Mang heard someone shout, "Hurry up, hurry up, it's raining! We'll have rice if you work quick and porridge if you don't—we're fighting the heavens for our dinner!"

Gu Mang had often shouted these very same words when he led the Wangba Army; he immediately looked up. As expected, he saw one of his old subordinates with his pant legs rolled up, standing atop the pile of rations and shouting orders.

The soldier saw Gu Mang watching him and walked over across the pile of grain, each step an audible rustle. "You're one of General Mo's personal guards?"

"…Yep."

"You must be new. Don't just stand around gawking, even personal guards in our Northern Frontier Army need to work. Look sharp and give us a hand!"

"Ah—of course." Within moments, Gu Mang had rolled up his sleeves, launched himself off one arm, and leapt onto the pile. Together, the two of them tacked the corners of the oilcloth down with heavy bricks.

The old soldier regarded Gu Mang with satisfaction. "You've got some skills. No wonder General Mo lets you attend him."

Gu Mang stepped over the soft sacks of grain, continuing their idle prattle as they pinned down the cloth. The soldier was a natural chatterbox and rambled without taking a breath: "Hey hey, this part needs another brick. That one you're holding isn't heavy enough. You'll see—the storms

on the frontier are serious. The wind'll kick up these smaller bricks like leaves. What? You think I'm exaggerating? No way; I might look young, but I'm a senior of the Northern Frontier Army. I was in the ranks when it was still called the Wangba Army. I fought with Gener—ahem, I fought with Gu Mang. This is just how Gu Mang taught us to place the bricks back then."

Trying not to laugh, Gu Mang asked, "So Gu Mang personally taught you how to place bricks?"

"That he did. I got it immediately; he even said I was clever. What are you laughing at? You don't believe it?" The cultivator's eyes went wide. "Swear on my life. That Gu Mang turned out to be an evil asshole later on, but whew, he was quite a guy back when he was in the army."

"*Was* he now."

"That's right. General Mo is too aloof; Gu Mang was much more approachable. Their styles are completely different. Back when we first got reassigned to the Northern Frontier Army, we didn't know what to make of it."

Gu Mang grinned. "General Mo isn't aloof; he's just bad at expressing himself. Honestly, he treats everyone quite well."

The cultivator nudged a crooked brick into place. "Ah, well anyway, that's just how General Mo is. He's so strict with everything, on top of being chilly and stingy with his words. But it's fine once you're used to it—better than getting transferred to Wangshu-jun's command, that's for sure."

Gu Mang blinked in surprise. "Transferred to Wangshu-jun?"

"Yep. They say when His Imperial Majesty was reorganizing the Wangba Army, he thought of giving it to Wangshu-jun, or dissolving the army entirely and splitting us all into different battalions. Who knows how it happened—I heard General Mo said something to him, and His Imperial Majesty handed the army over to him instead."

The smile on Gu Mang's face faded as he sank into thought. So the emperor had planned to deal with his thirty thousand remaining soldiers that way. Gu Mang knew what kind of man the emperor was. Without sufficient incentive, he would never stray from his original intentions. What had Mo Xi said to change the emperor's mind?

“Aiya, it’s started raining.” The cultivator elbowed Gu Mang. “Just the last bit left. Once we’re done with the bricks, go back to the barracks and get out of the rain. There are oilpaper umbrellas in the storehouse; I’ll take you there in a bit.”

Coming back to his senses, Gu Mang nodded. “Okay.”

Once it started, the rain came down faster and faster. The downpour seemed to flush all the colors from the world, and the city became a great pool of water—it was from this that it had gotten the name *Da’ze*, Large Pond.

Gu Mang stood beneath the storehouse’s canopy. The other cultivators storing the rations had opened either umbrellas or barriers to ward off the rain, chatting as they ran. The Northern Frontier Army was just as he remembered it, filled with lively youths. Even the upcoming battle hanging over their heads didn’t stop them from laughing as they chased each other into the rain and through the puddles.

“Come on, the rain’s getting worse, but the puddles won’t stop us from making it back,” the cultivator said. “That’s just how we are—we can’t help these bad habits Gu Mang passed down to us. We’re a rowdy bunch. Back then, when it rained, he’d run fastest of all.”

Beneath the roof of the shack, Gu Mang stood with a smile on his face. “He was young then. If he were here now, he wouldn’t have the energy to make such a racket. You head back first. I’ll leave when the rain lets up a little.”

The cultivator didn’t press him. He stepped bravely into the mud and disappeared behind the torrential curtain of rain.

Gu Mang was left alone in the storehouse. He stood quietly by the wooden railing, looking up at the sky. The splashing of rain brought up the pungent smell of petrichor. Droplets gathered and streamed off the roof as puddles dappled the ground. From where he stood, he could see the cultivators of the Northern Frontier Army guffawing with arms slung around each other’s shoulders. Their youthful forms receded into the distance, one after another.

In the instant they disappeared from sight, he seemed to see a twenty-year-old Gu Mang and a seventeen-year-old Mo Xi laughing as they darted

into the rainstorm, a piece of oilcloth held over their heads.

He blinked his blue eyes, and those figures blurred.

At last the rain eased up; Gu Mang opened the oilpaper umbrella and began to pick his way back to his quarters. But as he passed the main tent, he saw candlelight shining from it. The warm yellow light reflected in the puddles, where drumming raindrops turned it into a flickering glow.

Gu Mang stopped in his tracks. *Is Mo Xi still here this late?*

Mo Xi had a habit of running through his plans again by himself after presenting his strategy to others, but it was now full dark. He would have been able to run it not once, but five or six times by this point. How strange. Gu Mang closed the umbrella and leaned it against the tent. Gently lifting the flap, he stepped inside.

A figure indeed sat with his arms crossed before the sand table, but it wasn't Mo Xi.

Gu Mang was stunned. *Murong Lian?*

Murong Lian was perched crookedly in a chair beside the sand table, holding a still-smoking pipe. He narrowed his peach-blossom eyes, taking lazy puffs as he stared at the terrain map. Perhaps the rain was too loud, or he was too focused—he hadn't heard Gu Mang come in. He raised a hand to pick up a few of the little flags and move them around on the sand table.

Gu Mang stared intently at the arrangement for a while, then felt cold sweat break out on his back. The positions Murong Lian had chosen for these flags were coldly devious. Although his marching routes were different from Mo Xi's, his tactics were just as vicious and powerful. His arrangement provided less certainty of success, but the battle would be over faster—provided they won.

Murong Lian wasn't idly playing; he was running his strategy in earnest. And he was constantly refining his own ideas, moving the flags representing different magical forces again and again. With each adjustment, Gu Mang could see his reasoning clear as day…

What was the point of the careless attack formation Murong Lian had put forth this afternoon—the one Murong Mengze had broken with hardly

any effort?

A spate of violent coughing jolted Gu Mang from his thoughts. Murong Lian lowered the pipe, knitting his brows as he struggled for breath. Eyes gloomy, he pressed a hand to his chest as if trying to hold something at bay—but in the end, flecks of bloody foam still stained his lips.

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Murong Lian wiped his mouth with a snowy handkerchief edged in gold, his expression grim. Rising, he stared for a moment at the sand table before lifting a sapphire-ringed hand to dislodge each meticulously placed flag, slowly destroying the entire plotted battle. When his pale fingers had flicked the last of the scattered flags to the side, he collapsed into the chair. His head was tilted back, eyes closed in exhaustion. Murong Lian's silhouette seemed vulnerable and lonely in the dimming candlelight. He folded his hands, unconsciously rubbing the face of that sapphire ring.

After a long silence, Gu Mang heard him murmur, "Ridiculous." A sigh. "Am I really not your equal?"

Am I really not your equal?

The words echoed in Gu Mang's head the entire way back to his tent. He didn't understand. Murong Lian had a sound battle plan *and* he hated losing. Why fool around with half-hearted tactics during the war council? Why wait until the dead of night, when everyone was gone, to smoke a pipe of ephemera, rearrange the forces, and act out a magnificent battle, alone in the misty and miserable rain…

When Gu Mang returned to the commander's tent, Mo Xi was in the process of sending a message to the emperor. Just as he let the messenger bird go, he caught sight of Gu Mang coming in, and his expression softened.

"Where've you been? You're back so late." He stroked Gu Mang's hair. "Did you get wet?"

"…I went to check the rations they brought to the storehouse. I didn't get wet; I had an umbrella." Gu Mang rubbed his nose and decided not to mention what he'd seen in the main tent.

Mo Xi wrapped his arms around Gu Mang, warming him in his embrace. "The canteen sent food. Will you eat before you rest?"

Gu Mang craned his neck to take a look. As expected, he saw some simple dishes arranged on the table. There was even a bamboo tube nearby, keeping the rice warm inside.

"You didn't eat either?"

"I was waiting for you."

Gu Mang opened his mouth. He wanted to reprimand Mo Xi—*You know your stomach is sensitive; why did you wait? You could've just saved me something.* But when he saw Mo Xi with his dark eyes so gentle, he swallowed those words back down. Sighing, he pinched Mo Xi's porcelain cheek—perhaps the only person in the world who could do so. He said helplessly, "Oh, you."

It was only when he sat down at the table that he discovered all the dishes were ones the Wangba Army cultivators liked but could never afford to eat. A plate of braised pork in savory sauce paired with steamed buns of white flour, a dish of crispy bamboo shoots and lotus root, and a warming bowl of egg drop soup. Rare delicacies they were not, but it would be no small expense to provide a serving of each for all ranks of the army.

"You've really improved their fare," Gu Mang said. "Back then, if I wanted them to have some meat, I'd have to grovel, or rely on my charms to coax favors from the pretty widow running the village tavern."

Mo Xi ladled soup into a bowl and handed it to him. "You've done enough for them. You needn't sell yourself to pretty widows anymore. If you want to sell your body, you can sell it to me."

Biting his chopsticks, Gu Mang smiled.

The egg drop soup made in the barracks was cooked in one big pot, with shiny green onions stirred in. Mo Xi knew Gu Mang despised them, so he'd already picked every one out. As he watched Gu Mang slurp down hot soup to dispel the rain's chill, his gaze grew unendingly tender.

If anyone else in the world saw such an expression on Mo Xi's face, it would send a shiver down their spine. Gu Mang was the sole exception. He finished the soup, meeting Mo Xi's eyes as he looked up, and very naturally broke into a grin.

Mo Xi sighed, fishing out his pristine handkerchief and dabbing at the corner of Gu Mang's mouth. "Why haven't you changed a bit? You never remember to wipe your mouth after drinking soup."

"Aiyo, Young Master, who's as fussy as you? I grew up eating dirt."

The two of them chattered on as they ate. Halfway through the meal, Gu Mang paused in thought for a moment, then made up his mind to speak up. "Oh yeah, Mo Xi—there's something I want to tell you."

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Chapter 147:
Rumors (Part 1)

"WHAT IS IT?" Mo Xi asked.

"I saw Murong Lian in the main tent just now. He was strategizing on the sand table."

Mo Xi was eating soup with a porcelain spoon. Hearing this, his hand stilled. "Was he now…"

"Mn, and I got a look at the battle plan he set up. It was completely different from the one he presented earlier. His ideas were good—but it seems he doesn't intend to make them known. He was just running it for himself."

Mo Xi lowered his lashes and took another spoonful of soup, but he didn't bring it to his mouth. After a moment, he put the spoon down.

"Don't you find it strange?" Gu Mang asked.

"To be honest, I don't. Recently, I've found Murong Lian's actions to be increasingly contradictory."

"How so?"

"When Zhou He came to take you for black magic experiments, he tried to stop it. After he failed, he gave you that ring, saying it would make him aware of your condition. Then he came to the academy looking for me, just to tell me the news."

For some reason, Gu Mang's expression turned evasive upon hearing this.

Mo Xi observed the shift but said nothing. "Later on," he continued, "I learned the first excuse he gave to stop Zhou He was that he had his own black magic experiments to run."

"…Hm."

"How would there be such a coincidence? Besides, even if he did plan to conduct black magic experiments, and he just so happened to need a

subject at the exact same time as Zhou He, why didn't he ask to use you as the test subject after you returned to Xihe Manor?"

Silently, Gu Mang lowered his head to sip his soup. Only after a few mouthfuls did he say, "Maybe he didn't want to provoke you on top of everything else?"

"Then how do you explain the ring? When Murong Lian gave it to you, he said he could use it to track your condition. I didn't give it much thought at the time, but this doesn't make sense either. It was on His Imperial Majesty's orders that Zhou He took you for those trials. Unless Murong Lian planned to openly defy His Imperial Majesty, he wouldn't have been able to intervene no matter what state you were in."

Gu Mang hummed in assent. He kept his focus on his soup, even picking up his spoon to eat. Mo Xi knew Gu Mang never liked to eat soup with a spoon—unless he was trying to avoid making eye contact with him. Gu Mang might be able to keep his secrets before others; it was only in front of Mo Xi that the smallest habits exposed his feelings.

"To my mind, there are two possibilities as to why he gave you that ring. The first being that, if there were really a threat to your life, he would defy His Imperial Majesty and stop the experiments, even without my involvement."

Gu Mang swallowed a mouthful of soup, chuckling as he looked up. "C'mon, what are you thinking? He hates me. You saw how he treated me at Luomei Pavilion. Why would he ever defy His Imperial Majesty for *me*?"

"There's a second possibility," Mo Xi said. "Murong Lian was lying. That ring didn't track your condition at all but had some other purpose."

Gu Mang's eyes flickered. "Oh… When he gave me the ring, I did have a strange feeling, but I can't describe what it was. My head hurt, and my heart was pounding… Could that ring be imbued with some spell?"

"Hard to say." Mo Xi shook his head. "I'm afraid only Murong Lian knows. After Zhou He took you away, Murong Lian came to the cultivation academy to look for me and left a message with Jiang Yexue. He mentioned nothing else; his sole purpose was to tell me Sishu Terrace had taken you for black magic experiments. If his ring could really monitor your

condition, why bother fetching me? He could go to the emperor himself if he was concerned. Telling me would yield one result, and he knew exactly what it would be." Mo Xi paused. "He must have been absolutely certain I would stop Zhou He."

The bowl was empty. Gu Mang lowered his head, idly fiddling with the spoon.

"I was thinking about this before," Mo Xi continued, "and the more I thought about it, the more I became convinced Murong Lian had only one motive. He didn't want those black magic experiments carried out. No other explanation makes sense."

Gu Mang didn't respond. His long lashes were lowered, casting dappled shadows beneath his eyes. After a long silence, he spoke. "Mo Xi, he…he and I, we're actually…"

He looked as if he wanted to say something, as if he wanted to reveal some secret that had been buried a long time. But when the words came to the tip of his tongue, they dissolved behind his pursed lips.

"If it's a secret you can't speak of," said Mo Xi, "then don't."

Gu Mang remained silent.

"You lived in Wangshu Manor more than half your life. It's normal that there are things that must go unspoken. I'm not telling you this out of some ulterior motive. I trust you; you don't need to explain everything to me. I just want to ask—what kind of person do you think Murong Lian is?"

Mo Xi thought Gu Mang would think this over carefully before answering. He didn't expect the response that came so quickly.

"I don't know," said Gu Mang.

Mo Xi gazed into his eyes. Those blue eyes were clear, bright, and honest.

"The things I remember…" He hadn't wanted to bring this topic up, but he couldn't avoid it any longer. "…are incomplete. When it comes to him, I don't know if I can recall all the important facts, so I don't dare say for sure."

"Then, going by what you can remember, do you think smoking ephemera is something he would normally do?"

“No.”

Mo Xi sighed, nodding. “Neither do I. When I saw the depths to which he’d sunk after returning to the capital, it disgusted me. But after everything that’s followed, I feel like it might all be for show. His Imperial Majesty told you about wanting to shut down Murong Lian’s Luomei Pavilion, while the old emperor thought of deposing his heir and naming Murong Lian crown prince. His actions may be an attempt at self-preservation.”

This time, Gu Mang shook his head. “You’re wrong.”

Mo Xi was surprised. “How so?”

“All of Chonghua knows Murong Lian was once closest to attaining imperial power. He appears to pose a major threat to His Imperial Majesty, but he doesn’t really. He’s monitored too closely; he has no room to make any moves. And precisely because he has no room, His Imperial Majesty has no need to keep too tight a leash on him. Rather, to demonstrate his leniency, His Imperial Majesty indulges him more than anyone.” Gu Mang paused. “Do you remember how he used to be, before he started smoking ephemera?”

Mo Xi sighed. “Not much better. Spoiled, debauched, and aggressively competitive.”

Gu Mang nodded. “That last point is key. It’s true—Murong Lian used to be extremely competitive. Was he not interested in self-preservation back then? Did he not worry about how His Imperial Majesty saw him? There were no major changes in the power structure of the court before he started smoking ephemera, so he couldn’t be doing it to ease the emperor’s suspicions. There must be another reason.” He puffed out his cheeks, then slowly exhaled. “I’m just not sure what. I’ve been wondering whether Murong Lian met with some secret misfortune that changed his fundamental character and made him give up on himself. But when I saw him strategizing in the war tent, I realized he’s still that competitive Murong-gongzi at heart—he hasn’t changed. Do you know what he said?”

“What?”

“He said, ‘Am I really not your equal’? Look, he’s still holding a grudge and comparing himself to you.”

Mo Xi was struck momentarily speechless.

A sudden clamor came from outside. They heard a flurry of footsteps, followed by several people shouting in quick succession, “I was only saying”—“Why do you care so much”—“Don’t hold me so tightly, aren’t you just a slave-born garrison soldier,” along with the sounds of scuffling and struggling.

A personal guard called from outside the tent, “General Mo! Members of the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion have violated military regulations and spread rumors before battle! The three perpetrators have been taken into custody—we ask General Mo to determine their punishment!”

Someone from the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion, spreading rumors before battle?

Mo Xi and Gu Mang exchanged a glance. “One moment,” Mo Xi said. Only after Gu Mang put on the golden mask did he allow the group to enter.

The Scarlet-Plumed Battalion was unlike the Northern Frontier Army. They took only pure-blooded nobles, and their military uniforms were each embroidered with insignias that represented their own clan. Mo Xi surveyed the three men before him: one was a member of the Lin Clan, and one was a member of the Zhou Clan. The third gave Mo Xi pause—he was a distant uncle of Mengze’s. Mo Xi had previously met him at the New Year’s Eve feast.

Mo Xi frowned. “What’s going on?”

The guard cupped his fist in a salute. “Xihe-jun! These three cultivators of the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion were inappropriately discussing the commander’s private affairs in front of the troops. They were spreading rumors, telling everyone that—that you…”

“That I what?”

This guard revered Mo Xi. As he struggled to find the right words, the distant relative of the Murong Clan raised his voice. “What rumor was I spreading? Everyone knows General Mo and my niece are taken with each other! As the princess’s uncle, I was only too happy to hear of them sharing a *private* moment—is it against the law to offer my two cents?!”

“Pah!” the guard spat in anger. “Don’t you know when to shut up?!”

“You’re telling *me* to shut up? Someone like you, without a single drop of royal blood, dares order *me* around? Don’t you know I’m a relation of His Imperial Majesty? Cross me, and I’ll have your entire family run out of the capital!”

By this point, Mo Xi had some idea of what was going on. Cutting off the uncle’s impassioned rant, he said, “Sir, I’m afraid you’re mistaken.”

“Huh?”

“The conversation Mengze and I shared in the main war tent concerned public affairs; it was nothing private. You’re a senior cultivator of the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion, sir; I’m sure you understand the meaning of discretion. Chonghua stands on the cusp of war with Liao. I will not pursue this matter at the moment, but I sincerely hope you will speak more prudently in the future and avoid another offense.”

The uncle did not appreciate this. His eyes widened like a bullfrog’s, and he replied through gritted teeth. “Very well! Xihe-jun, it seems you’re nothing but a two-faced liar! Commanding general or not, you’re still my junior! You sleep with my niece then turn around and criticize me like this —so disrespectful, see if I don’t—”

Mo Xi raised a hand to interrupt. “When did I sleep with your niece?”

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Chapter 148:
Rumors (Part 2)

"Y-YOU *DENY* IT?!" The uncle flushed with rage, jabbing a finger at Mo Xi's face. "I see! Everyone says Xihe-jun is a righteous gentleman, but I think you're a beast in the guise

of a man! After doing the deed, you act like you don't even know her—you even try to punish your woman's uncle! Y-you ungrateful wretch!"

As he got into the swing of his tirade, the expressions of their audience shifted and diverged. The guard who revered Mo Xi was about to lose his mind with rage, while the other two rumor-spreaders trembled with fear. Gu Mang's expression was completely hidden under his mask, but judging from his posture, he seemed unruffled.

As for Mo Xi, he sat on the chair within the commander's tent, hands folded over his knee. After leveling the uncle with a cool gaze, he said, "I owe Mengze a debt of gratitude, so on her behalf, I will call you *sir* once more. Sir, I'm not sure where you heard such an absurd story, but I will tell you now: Mengze is pure and unsullied; I have never dishonored her."

"You! Who are you trying to fool?! Don't try that righteous saint act in front of me!"

Suppressing his rage, Mo Xi replied, "I was alone with Mengze in the main war tent, but no untoward act occurred whatsoever. If you don't believe me, go ask her yourself."

"Who said we were talking about the main tent?" The uncle's bushy brows drew together in disdain. "You want to grope my niece in the main war tent for all to see? Pervert! I was talking about noontime! You, in your own tent—aiya, it's too shameful to say out loud. You know precisely what you did to Mengze!"

Mo Xi and Gu Mang both froze.

The uncle became gleeful. Baring his teeth, he sneered, "Am I right? Do you still deny it? Xihe-jun, within the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion, I've always heard your Northern Frontier Army is well-disciplined, never once

stumbling over the temptation of womanly charms. But I now see their commander hasn't even the guts to own up to his own actions! Ah, what a pity my silly niece is so blind. She has eyes for no one else and insists on favoring a beastly deviant like you—she even let you sully her…"

Holding up his age and rank as a shield, the old uncle's words grew more and more cutting. Mo Xi's expression darkened as his lips pressed together, not letting a single word slip past.

Gu Mang, however, couldn't bear to listen. "Are you done?"

"And who the hell are *you*?" The uncle glanced at Gu Mang, then made a great show of rolling his eyes. "Oh, just a personal guard—one who dares lecture a relative of the imperial family! Heh, this is going to be quite the tale to tell!" Another burst of malicious laughter issued from his mouth.

He was still laughing when Mo Xi said, "You're right. At noon, I did meet with someone in my tent."

All eyes flew to Mo Xi in astonishment.

After the initial shock, the uncle barked out a loud belly laugh. "Ha ha ha, see! *See!* Wasn't I right all along? Little Fireball, dallying with girls is no big deal, it's not like you've violated some major martial law. As long as you—"

But Mo Xi cut him off. "Attending official."

The personal guard looked completely lost. Expression complicated, he answered, "Here."

"Record that I had a private tryst and indict me before His Imperial Majesty."

"…Understood."

Mo Xi wasn't done. He leaned back in the chair, his slender fingers interlocked as he spoke with deliberate emphasis. "When you've finished, record that these three members of the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion spread rumors before battle. Each of them is to be indicted as well."

That imperial uncle's eyes widened in outrage. "Mo Xi! Wh-what are you doing? You admit it, yet you're still saying I've told lies! Wh-wh-where—where do you get off!"

Mo Xi rose from his seat, looking down at him through eyes cool as glass. “Because the person in my tent was not Princess Mengze.”

If everyone was shocked when Mo Xi admitted to the tryst, these words shattered the atmosphere in the tent like a tightly strung bow that had finally snapped. Even Gu Mang widened his blue eyes, staring at Mo Xi in shock, to say nothing of the others.

Mo Xi stepped over to the uncle and reached out to grasp his pudgy face. “I’ve endured you all for far too long,” he said, voice low. “For almost ten years—since the day Mengze saved me—you’ve made up lies and spread every kind of gossip. Today, you’ve finally done it directly to my face. Sir, if I may—is there a *point* to all this? You claim I have a relationship with Mengze, you claim I’ve been intimate with Mengze; do you think I’ll marry her if you say it often enough, or do you perhaps understand me better than I understand myself? All these years, I’ve shown Mengze nothing but respect and gratitude. This I’ve said countless times, in public and in private. None of you listen to me; you exaggerate the smallest rumor, jumping to conclusions and speaking as if I’ll be wedding her at any moment.”

He paused. “If Mengze did marry into Xihe Manor, would that be a benefit to her, or to you?”

The uncle’s complexion was turning waxy, his eyes darting about. “Xihe-jun, what do you mean by this…”

“I’m just asking a question,” Mo Xi said darkly. “You spread this news so enthusiastically without a care for besmirching your own niece’s honor—you’re a member of a cadet branch of the Murong Clan; no one knows your motives better than you. Why ask me?”

“You… You…” The uncle’s lips, greasy as pig intestines, quivered as his eyes flitted wildly. But Mo Xi had hit the nail on the head; he couldn’t say much else.

Mo Xi straightened and wearily closed his eyes. Just as he was about to put a decisive end to this conversation, the uncle hit on a new plan of attack. His eyebrows shot up as he blurted, “Mo Xi, enough…enough with your excuses! If you ask me, you’re a cold-blooded and fickle man!”

Receiving no reply, the uncle forged ahead. “You and Mengze were playmates—childhood sweethearts! Who doesn’t know that the one who pursued her from the start was you!”

Mo Xi’s phoenix eyes had gone wide. Over the course of this argument, he had cycled through shock, disgust, fury, and exhaustion, but had not yet found himself at a loss. These words left him dumbstruck; he almost choked on his next words. “How exactly was I the one who pursued her?”

“If you weren’t, why would she harm herself so gravely to save you at Dongting Lake? If she could do that for you, you must have led her on—why would she go so far for nothing? Don’t tell me you’re going to say Mengze thought too highly of herself?”

Of course Mo Xi wouldn’t condemn her with the words *thought too highly of herself* just to clear his own name. Seeing him silent, the uncle regained his courage. “Now that her body’s failed and she’s gotten older, you no longer favor her and hurry to distance yourself. Everyone says Xihe-jun is a truehearted and loyal gentleman, but it turns out you’re not a gentleman at all—you’re a despicable and shameless traitor!”

His last words resounded in the quiet of the tent. After a moment, crisp applause rang out.

“Nicely done. Are you finished?”

The uncle turned to look. Upon seeing the guard next to Mo Xi was the one clapping, he couldn’t help but snarl, “*You* again? I’ve already said you’re unworthy of conversing with me!”

Gu Mang laughed. “I’m not trying to converse with you. I just wanted to ask if you’ve had your fun.” He turned to the other guard. “Brother, I’ll trouble you to escort this senior away. Find him a tent and lock him up; keep him well guarded. This senior has a gloriously silver tongue and a superb way with words. If we let him run free and keep shouting, there would be no need for us to fight Liao at all. We could just go ahead and convict Xihe-jun ourselves.”

That guard was still trying to process the revelation that Xihe-jun really had an affair with someone in his tent. He stuttered in reply, “Ah…? Th-then, General Mo, what do you…”

Before Mo Xi could answer, the uncle shouted: “You Mo brat! Lock me up if you want! If you have the guts, go tell all of Chonghua you favor another woman. Forget the side branches of the Murong Clan and our motives—go see what the court of public opinion has to say about you! Little Fireball, if you betray Mengze, you’re an immoral beast! As for whatever girl secretly hitched a ride on you, she’s just a—”

He didn’t have time to say what he was before Mo Xi’s hand shot out and closed around his neck. Mo Xi was strong; even if he hadn’t intended to injure this man, in his rage, he choked him until he was close to fainting.

Mo Xi lifted the uncle off his feet with one hand, staring into his reddening face. “I just remembered something. Sir, your name is Murong Lie, right?”

Murong Lie was kicking his feet in midair, eyes rolling as they stared at Mo Xi from a face the color of pig’s liver.

“When the late Wangshu refused to marry Madam Zhao, many officials made remonstrations. The one who spoke most harshly and vehemently against him was a distant relative named Murong Lie. That was you, was it not?”

“Mngh… Mnngh…!”

Mo Xi’s black pupils flashed with icy light. He had reached the limits of his patience. “Back then you castigated the late Wangshu, and now you do the same to me. Sir, you truly haven’t changed in the slightest—you’re awfully concerned with other people’s marriages. But this junior is likely to disappoint you. Mengze is like a sister to me. Even if all of Chonghua takes me for a shameless hypocrite, I will never take her as my wife.”

Murong Lie was about to pass out; his eyes rolled as he gasped for air. By now, the other two nobles of the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion were trembling like chaff in the wind. Only when Murong Lie was truly on the verge of suffocation did Mo Xi’s slender fingers release him. Panting, Murong Lie collapsed to the ground like so much mud, his hands clutching at his bright red neck.

“Sir, perhaps you had an advantage over the late Wangshu, but today, I’ll give you a warning. The late Wangshu was the late Wangshu, and I am who I am. The events of thirty years ago will not repeat themselves here.

Chonghua does not need another late lord Wangshu.” Mo Xi paused. “Nor does it need another Madam Zhao. You can save your breath.”

At last, he waved a weary hand, ordering the guards to escort away the rumor-spreaders and dismissing the rest of the attendants. When everyone had filed out, Mo Xi lifted his fingers and began adding barriers to the tent.

Gu Mang looked at him with worry. “Mo Xi, even if he was being difficult, there must have been other ways to get around it. Why did you admit you were with someone at noon?”

Mo Xi glanced at him. “I didn’t just admit it to him. I already told Mengze.”

“Told her what?”

“That there’s been someone in my heart for a long time.”

Gu Mang fell silent.

“She never believed me when I said so before. But she’s probably noticed some signs recently and realized I hadn’t lied to her,” Mo Xi said. “Don’t overthink it. I couldn’t possibly hide it forever. We attack Da’ze City tomorrow, and I still have scrolls to look over—you should get some rest.”

Gu Mang took in the intense stubbornness in his defined features. His heart both fluttered and ached, and he couldn’t help sighing. “Ah, why… Why go so far…”

Mo Xi set the final barrier, then turned to answer. “Because I want to.”

Gu Mang sighed again and said no more. He walked up to Mo Xi and raised gentle hands to cup his face. After a moment of silence, he pressed their foreheads together.

Night fell, but Gu Mang didn’t feel like sleeping. Mo Xi looked over his scrolls, while Gu Mang ate mung bean cake and read his compiled memory notes. After a while, he closed his book. “Mo Xi.”

Mo Xi looked up from his files, prodding at the lamp with a slim silver poker. “What is it?”

“I forgot to ask earlier,” Gu Mang said. “You mentioned the late Wangshu and Madam Zhao to Murong Lie… What happened to them?”

Mo Xi’s lashes fluttered. “Madam Zhao is Murong Lian’s mother. Do you remember her?”

“Not clearly,” Gu Mang replied. “I barely interacted with her in the first place; she wasn’t much for small talk. When she was alive, she wasn’t harsh on the servants, but she was very strict with Murong Lian. She was always refusing to let him do this or that. He had to do everything according to her wishes.” Gu Mang paused, then smiled awkwardly. “But I remember she was very pretty.”

“Madam Zhao’s looks were indeed extraordinary,” Mo Xi said. “She was once considered one of Chonghua’s great beauties. The late emperor betrothed her to the late Wangshu…Murong Lian’s father, Murong Xuan. She was talented and pretty, and her familial status matched his own—but Murong Xuan had fallen for a lowborn girl. He refused to marry Madam Zhao at all costs, and the situation became…unpleasant.”

Gu Mang scratched his head. He could recall some details about Madam Zhao and Murong Xuan’s turbulent past, so he wasn’t surprised. “Then why did Murong Xuan marry her?” he tentatively asked.

“The pressure, most likely, and a few other reasons.” Mo Xi shook his head. “It was a long time ago, and each rumor tells a different story. Why were you thinking about it now?”

“Oh…because I’ve been thinking about someone,” Gu Mang said. “One of the other slaves in Wangshu Manor. When I was little, she cared for me a lot. I’ve always wondered if she might be the maiden the late Wangshu fell in love with—”

“It couldn’t be her,” said Mo Xi.

Gu Mang was surprised to hear him so certain. “Why not?”

“The maiden the late Wangshu loved was a commoner from Lin’an, not a slave.”

Gu Mang stuffed another piece of mung bean cake into his mouth, his bulging cheeks framed by the ink-dark hair that hung loose around his face. “Ah—then, if she wasn’t a slave, why couldn’t she marry him?”

“The difference in their status was still too great. And that maiden was injured somehow and couldn’t clearly remember her family background. I’m not sure of the details either; I’ve only heard the stories. Lin’an is Yue Juntian’s fiefdom—all the commoners there fall under his jurisdiction—and Yue Juntian’s relationship with the late Wangshu had never been good. One story claims that as soon as Yue Juntian heard the late Wangshu was in love with a Lin’an maiden, he brought his underlings to an audience with the emperor and claimed the maiden was a spy from the Liao Kingdom. In the end, the late Wangshu and that maiden were forced to part.”

Mo Xi set down his scroll. He had never been fond of this kind of gossip; he felt disgust when he heard it from others, and his expression grew embarrassed as it came from his own mouth. He paused. “But there’s another story that’s more popular. According to that one, Yue Juntian didn’t say the maiden was a spy from the Liao Kingdom. Rather, he claimed he’d sent people to investigate her background and found that she was a brothel girl. After he reported this to the emperor, naturally, that Lin’an maiden could never enter Wangshu Manor and become Madam Murong.”

His head was pounding now; he massaged his brow. “That’s the gist of it. There are other stories, but I’ve forgotten them. Most have something to do with Yue Juntian. Everyone says he was the one to ruin the marriage; because the lady was a commoner from his own lands and her background was unknown, he wasn’t willing to take responsibility for anything that might come out about her and opposed the match.”

Watching Mo Xi’s mounting exasperation as he recalled this ancient gossip, Gu Mang couldn’t help but shake his head in amusement and pity. He stepped behind Mo Xi to knead his shoulders, then leaned against his back. “Okay okay,” he said soothingly, “if you really can’t remember, you don’t have to tell me any more.”

“Sorry. If you’re interested, I can buy you a chronicle of these kinds of events…”

“Nah,” Gu Mang cut in. “There’s no need.” How could he send Mo Xi to fetch him a book like that? Those little bookselling stalls didn’t deserve such a scare; the shopkeeper would probably think Xihe-jun was there to shut him down.

Sharing this kind of easy conversation, the two of them whiled the night away.

Rumors about Mo Xi and Mengze were spreading in whispers through the army, but tomorrow’s battle still lay ahead. The Northern Frontier Army was more disciplined than the other two forces, so the gossip circulating within the Scarlet Plumes caused no major disruptions.

In the first glimmer of dawn on their second day at Da’ze, Chonghua launched its second attack on the city.

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Chapter 149:
Vision of Chen Tang

“A REPORT—!”

In the governor’s mansion, the guoshi raised indifferent eyes. His hands never paused on the qin, plucking at the strings as he spoke. “Enter.”

The messenger stepped inside and knelt to perform obeisance.

“How is the situation outside?” the guoshi asked coolly.

“Chonghua launched their second attack this morning. The turret at the north end of the city is lost. The defensive troops have retreated to the northern market and reinforced their position with barriers.”

“Can they hold until tomorrow?”

Cold sweat beaded on the messenger’s forehead. Head bowed, he cupped his fist in salute. “Th-the commander says he’s incompetent; h-he can only try his best…”

“Incompetent. Quite,” the guoshi remarked. The music of the qin increased in tempo. He flicked his fingers and called, “Rainbell, come.”

With a flash of light, one of the eyes embedded in the guqin opened wide. It blinked, and jade-green light shone from its pupil, brightening until it was too blinding to look at directly. When the glow faded, a glimmering scale floated above the guqin.

A sweep of the guoshi’s wide sleeves sent the scale flying toward the messenger official, where it stopped at eye level. “Take this. It’s Xuanwu Armor—”

The messenger official blanched. Was the Xuanwu Armor not one of the godly miracles left behind from prehistory? The most unbreakable, most invincible defense artifact in the world?! Had it truly been hidden in the guoshi’s nine-eyed qin this entire time? Still reeling, he heard the guoshi finish his sentence: “—shrapnel.”

The man blinked.

“Don’t underestimate it because it’s only one scale. It’s more than sufficient to defend against the strikes of ten thousand strong soldiers. Bring it to our incompetent defense commander, and remember—the commander can die, but this Xuanwu scale cannot be lost. If anything should happen to it…” He paused to allow a thrum from the qin strings, then smiled. “I’ll see all of you buried with it.”

The messenger official hastily agreed. He accepted the scale, holding it over his head as he retreated on shaky legs.

The guoshi was once again left alone in the empty governor’s mansion. The qin music flowed from his fingers like an underground spring. Floating before the guoshi, that ball of light he’d called Jingchen had gained a faint and shadowy form. It now looked like a pure white pup, each strand of its snowy fur glimmering with light. It was not yet alert; the creature lay perfectly still on the soft carpet of the governor’s mansion with its paws over its eyes. Wrapped in the soothing sounds of the qin, it seemed at peace.

The guoshi looked up, the light from the spiritual beast flickering in his eyes. “Jingchen,” he whispered, “I’ve nearly broken the seal they placed on you. Just a day and a half more, and I can take you away from here, back to our home. Be good now; don’t cause any more trouble for me. Hm?”

The pup’s ears twitched. Its eyes opened a crack, revealing a fiendish blue light entirely at odds with its soft body.

By this point, the Liao Kingdom had taken heavy losses from the battle at the city’s northern turret, where the soaring snake flags of the Northern Frontier Army were already flying high above the ruins. Mo Xi’s vanguard held the north corner of the city while not far in front of them, the Liao Kingdom cultivators’ jade-green defense barrier was rising once more.

A scout rushed back to report to Mo Xi, who was assessing the Liao army’s defense preparations. “General Mo, do we press the attack?”

Mo Xi’s sharp brows were drawn together, his arms crossed as he watched that green barrier rise higher and higher. His expression was grave. “Where did they get the Xuanwu Armor from…?”

Stunned, the scout turned again to look at that jade-green barrier. “Xuanwu Armor?! I-isn’t that the holy artifact belonging to our Wise Gentleman?! After the Wise Gentleman passed, the Xuanwu Armor lost its oathbound master. I thought no one knew where it ended up. How has it reappeared in the hands of the Liao Kingdom?”

Mo Xi pursed his lips, eyes dark. “This barrier is merely a shadow of the Xuanwu Armor’s real power—an incomplete version. Perhaps they only have one or two scales.” He paused. “But if it’s real, even half a scale is enough to give us trouble. Relay my orders: Don’t pursue them. Defend the city’s northern wall and regroup in our current position.”

“Understood!”

“And invite all the commanders to the main tent. We will discuss our plans for the third wave of attack.”

This third sally was not so much a siege as it was a hunt. Chen Tang had sealed the Demonblood Beast in the lake in the north of Da’ze City. Chonghua had already breached the city walls nearby; cultivators with swift martial skills could use this inroad to speed toward the lake and hunt down the Beast.

Since this was a matter of utmost secrecy, Mo Xi could not brief his men in full. Only the scouts, hand-picked by the emperor himself, were told that their mission was to seek a wisp of the Demonblood Beast’s soul. All other cultivators were given a different excuse and dispatched as reinforcements.

It was also for this mission that Gu Mang had joined the troops. When everyone else had left the main tent, Mo Xi gave Gu Mang a detailed explanation of the true situation. “Here’s the plan, more or less. I’m sending the two armies headed by Murong Lian and Mengze to attack the main city of Da’ze. The goal isn’t to take the city, but to divide the Liao Kingdom army’s forces. Our true priority is the squadron composed of ten elite scouts. While we hold the Liao forces’ attention, they must advance toward the lake in the north of the city and seize that wisp of the Demonblood Beast’s soul.”

He handed the soul-pointing compass and soul-seeking rope to Gu Mang.

“As long as we can lay hands on that piece of soul, the Liao Kingdom will struggle to revive the Demonblood Beast. In this battle, the priority isn’t to control Da’ze—the most critical thing is to keep the Liao Kingdom from taking the Beast’s soul first. Do you understand?”

Gu Mang fastened the gleaming gold coil of the soul-seeking rope at his waist, gave it a pat, and took the compass in hand. “Don’t worry. When has your Gu Mang-gege ever failed to complete a mission?”

He hadn’t yet put on his mask; he stood before Mo Xi in the clean-cut uniform of the Northern Frontier Army with his hair in a neat braid. At his waist were the golden rope, his dagger, and the mask; a weapon compartment was strapped to his wrist. His robe’s high crossed collar, edged in blue and black, completely hid the slave collar beneath those pristine robes. At that moment, he cut a figure every bit as dauntless and heroic as the first time he had ridden out for battle.

Mo Xi gazed at him, then reached out to bring him into his arms. He bent down and placed a gentle kiss on the top of his head. “That’s right. You’ve never failed. But this time, remember: no matter what, your safety is most important. If you run into trouble, you must send word to me.”

He reached out to caress Gu Mang’s neck through the layers of his uniform collar, touching the spot where they had left lotus sigils to protect each other when they were very young.

Mo Xi nuzzled against Gu Mang’s forehead. “If you send word,” he murmured, “I’ll come to you at once. Will you remember that?”

In the past, Gu Mang had always been Mo Xi’s protector. He had thought only to ensure Mo Xi’s safety and had no wish to share any suffering with him. The old Gu Mang would’ve laughed and said, *Don’t worry, I’ll be fine*, or *Your Gu Mang-gege is the strongest*.

But now, Gu Mang’s gentle blue eyes blinked as he looked up and said, “Okay. I’ll remember.”

There was no time to lose. Barely two shichen had passed since the army had paused their attack to regroup. As the day waned and the sun sat heavy and red on the horizon, the Northern Frontier Army got their orders. Chonghua began their third attack.

This strike was designed to be quick; even on their guard, the Liao Kingdom still scrambled to meet it. This time, Murong Lian's fifty thousand cultivators engaged the Liao army head-on, while Mo Xi's army clashed with the defensive troops on Da'ze's north side. The smoke of war obscured the sun, the scarlet of blood on the ground more intense than the dying light.

Under cover of this formidable attack, the ten scouts, Gu Mang among them, slipped into the north end of the city. Each took a different route, sweeping like a gust of wind toward the lake that contained the remnant of the Demonblood Beast's soul.

Da'ze Lake was vast, surrounded by mountain ridges that stretched into the distance far beyond what the eye could see. It was already growing dark, the last thread of sunlight skimming low across the lake's surface. A few of the geese on the sandy shores startled into flight, honking as they rose into the twilit sky.

In his fitted black martial robes, Gu Mang leapt to the top of a tower along the shore. He stood in the wind with a hand behind his back, staring down at the light reflecting off the water below.

Just as he made to spring down to the shore, sharp agony split his head; a burning ache gripped his heart and shot up his spine. Gu Mang let out a low gasp of pain, clapping a hand to his pulsing temple.

Why does it have to be now…

He sucked in a few steadying breaths. The pain receded slightly, but the dizziness intensified. At the same moment, the crash of distant fighting echoed through the skies from where the main forces were advancing through the city.

Gu Mang was running out of time. He blinked hard, trying to clear his vision, but when he raised his head and gazed once more toward the wide lake below, what he saw was a hazy illusion.

"Ch-Chen Tang…?" he stammered in astonishment.

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He seemed to see Chen Tang standing in the middle of the lake, towering waves rising around him. Chen Tang walked on the waves amid the surging storm, white robes flaring in the gale like an immortal cast down to earth.

Face stern, Chen Tang raised a hand to summon a seven-stringed guqin. He lifted his chin slightly. “Hua Po’an, listen to me. Your wild ambition ends here. I’ll allow neither the continent of the Nine Provinces nor the nation of Chonghua to fall into your hands—you will never achieve your goals.”

Hua Po’an.… Hua Po’an.

That name seemed to contain deep meaning, like a queen of the night blossom unfurling in a dense thicket of darkness, exploding into Gu Mang’s muddy mind. It had some form of power, flooding his heart with bloodthirsty killing intent.

“You will *never* amount to anything more than that wretched disciple from the cultivation academy.”

A furious howl ripped from the depths of Gu Mang’s heart. *Nonsense! Nonsense! I’ll tear you apart—I’ll kill you! What do I want that I don’t yet have?! What gives you the right to decide my fate, you ridiculous man.… You.…powerless, incompetent fool!*

“This ends today,” said Chen Tang.

With a strum of his fingertips, a single note twanged from the qin. Gu Mang’s mind shuddered—the black magic energy in his body strained to break free. On the verge of losing control, Gu Mang called through gritted teeth, “Yongye, come!”

The demonic dagger coalesced in his palm. Gu Mang gripped the handle, clenching his jaw as he viciously sliced into the back of his left hand. Bright blood streamed out, and the violent agony yanked him from the sucking mud of the illusion. He gasped for air, screwing his eyes shut. When he looked up again, Da’ze Lake was a desolate field before him, its rippling waves gleaming in the dusky light. The illusion of Chen Tang had disappeared.

Gu Mang panted as he dismissed Yongye and tended quickly to the wound. He shot an anxious glance at the rippling surface of the lake. He didn't know why he would see lingering scenes from hundreds of years ago—but this wasn't the first time he'd seen Chen Tang in his mind. Why?

All sorts of ideas rushed through his head, but he had no time to consider them. He'd tell Mo Xi about his strange symptoms when he returned. Right now, his priority was to seize the wisp of the Demonblood Beast's soul that remained in the lake. As he ruminated, he calibrated the compass, imbued it with spiritual energy, then pointed it toward the surface of the lake.

"Point the way."

Almost at once, the compass began spinning maniacally. Two minutes later, that needle in the shape of a willow branch gradually slowed and came to a stop.

Gu Mang was instantly dumbfounded.

The compass didn't point toward the lake as the emperor said it would; instead, it pointed toward Gu Mang himself. Gu Mang whirled and saw a cluster of buildings behind him. This soul-pointing compass was pointing toward the heart of Da'ze City.

"…Is it broken?"

Gu Mang took a few steps to the side and gave the compass a shake. As expected, the needle hesitated and wavered, unsure where to point.

"Where is that scrap of the Demonblood Beast's soul in the lake?" Gu Mang repeated the question several times. Once again, the compass's branch-shaped needle wobbled and turned.

But in the end, it still pointed toward the middle of the city. Gu Mang fell silent. He tucked the compass away, stroking his chin.

According to the emperor's intelligence reports, the Demonblood Beast's remnant bit of soul was sunk in the depths of Da'ze Lake. He couldn't know what the other scouts' compasses showed, but his was stubbornly pointing toward the city center. There had to be some reason.

In that case, could it be…

His heart skipped a beat.

Could it be that, in just a handful of days, the Liao Kingdom had captured that wisp of the Demonblood Beast's soul—was it now trapped somewhere in the city?

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Chapter 150:
Nine-Eyed Qin

THE LAST SMEAR of bloodred light sank beneath the mountains. Night had fallen. At the governor's mansion, Gu Mang stopped atop the ridge of the roof.

He could see the glimmering lights of the city and the blinding flashes as the cultivators of Chonghua and Liao clashed beyond the high city walls. From where he stood, they were like thousands of twinkling fireworks, magnificent to behold. The eastern wind carried the sounds of explosions to his ears, shouts and wails piercing the smoke and flames of war to reach him.

That battle had little to do with him at this moment. He looked back down at the compass in his hand; the needle pointed down into the middle of the governor's mansion. The room below was brightly lit, with soft snatches of qin music flowing from it.

"Looks like this is the place," Gu Mang murmured.

The Liao Kingdom guards might have posed a problem for some, but not Gu Mang. Despite having lost the memories of his five years in Liao, those black magic spells had been carved into his bones when the guoshi tempered him. Even if he remembered nothing, those techniques still came effortlessly to his fingers.

With just a few simple spells, all the cultivators within the manor were made to sleep. Gu Mang leapt softly down from the roof. It was when he landed in the courtyard that he realized there were in fact very few guards here, and those present were unremarkable, with shallow cultivation. They had skill enough to send and receive messages, but in a real fight, a single lift of his finger would have more than defeated them.

Gu Mang pressed his fingertips to a prone cultivator's neck. As expected, their spiritual energy was exceedingly feeble.

His gaze grew colder and graver.

The compass indicated that the remnant of the Demonblood Beast's soul was in this building. There was only one reason the Liao Kingdom might not immediately transport it away—Chen Tang's seal had not been fully broken. Even the Liao army wouldn't be so reckless as to bring it out of Da'ze before that.

But if this mansion held such an important object, why were the guards surrounding it so few and so weak?

A man's low singing from within the room interrupted Gu Mang's thoughts: "A sword of five years turns the seasons, a sword of ten years turns back time. This sword's edge sharp enough to part the waters, this life too short to part my heart from yours."

The wind was crisp, and the moon was bright. Pine and bamboo swayed in the little courtyard. The fires of war rose and fell in the distance, the roar of battle shaking the skies. Within the hall, the melody of the qin danced like willow fuzz, drifting like dust carried up and down on the wind, lingering on in endless melancholy. Blood flowed in rivers outside, but here all was peaceful and refined. It was a starkly eerie atmosphere: the undefended room, the unceasing sound of the qin, the lone warrior waiting in the dark, and this distant singing.

Gu Mang suddenly felt it all so familiar—as if he'd experienced all this before. But his mission was pressing; he had no time to think. His eyes darkened, faint light flickering in his pupils. "Demonic hearts," he whispered, "obey me. All of you, be summoned."

Although these Liao Kingdom cultivators had undergone no tempering, their cultivation method left traces of demonic qi in their bodies. They were optimal targets for control. At Gu Mang's order, the cultivators he'd sent to sleep opened their eyes as one, pupils aglow with deep blue light.

"Go!"

Those cultivators shot forward, a dozen lining up in a row and viciously slamming their bodies into the great doors of the main hall.

With a massive *boom*, the doors broke apart. In the smoky sawdust that rose up, Gu Mang saw the dead governor's family dangling like wind chimes. Beyond the swaying corpses, a man in white and gold sat with his

back to the door. Beneath his slender, pale hands lay a guqin of human skin, the nine eyes embedded on its body whirling madly.

A bone-chilling cold rushed from Gu Mang's feet and up his spine. He knew where he'd seen this scene—in the sword demon Li Qingqian's memory illusionscape.

Back in Murong Chuyi's courtyard, Gu Mang hadn't entered the illusion, but Mo Xi had magically replayed Li Qingqian's downfall for him later. He had seen Li Qingqian storm into the Guoshi Hall of the Liao Kingdom to avenge Hong Shao. In that memory, the premises had likewise been empty of guards, while inside sat a qin-playing man in a gleaming gold mask, turning to bare too-white teeth. Now he seemed to be reenacting that memory, save that the guoshi's hall had become the governor's residence.

The guoshi of the Liao Kingdom turned, tilting that golden-masked face and grinning. "It's been a while, General Gu."

No matter how incomplete his memories, Gu Mang could never forget this man who had escorted him into that secret room, flayed the skin from his bones, and remade him.

The man personally guarding the Demonblood Beast's soul wisp was the guoshi himself. Now everything made sense. The guoshi's martial skills were dangerously unknown—if he was here, no other guard was necessary.

"Someone told me the emperor of Chonghua took you for black magic experiments…that your mind was destroyed, and your body ruined," the guoshi said blandly. "I see Jiang Fuli has done an admirable job of nursing you back to health—that man was born with meddlesome hands. So you've finally come."

He shot a glance at the Liao Kingdom cultivators under Gu Mang's control. "*Tsk*, look at the skill with which you use black magic techniques." He shifted his gaze back to Gu Mang, taking in Gu Mang's mask and smiling sweetly. "But what a shame that your motherland still won't acknowledge you. It's been years since you've returned home, yet you're only worthy of serving Chonghua behind a mask."

Gu Mang didn't deign to respond. His eyes darted around the hall and landed on that glowing silver pup where it lay beside the guqin. Perhaps it

was because he was himself thoroughly imbued with black magic qi—Gu Mang sensed immediately that this curled-up beast was precisely that remnant of the sealed Demonblood Beast's soul.

His eyes darkened. Voice low, he called, "Scatter formation!"

Those dozen low-level cultivators flew into an attack formation across the room, surrounding the guoshi. Knowing their spiritual energy was feeble, Gu Mang conjured a stack of malevolent demon talismans with a twirl of his fingertips and shot them, brimming with dark qi, into the cultivators' bodies. Their spiritual energy redoubled as they lunged snarling at the guoshi.

But the guoshi was no easy target. He rose from his seat, still holding his qin and playing smoothly. As he countered the cultivators' attacks, he spoke. "If nothing else, we were comrades for five years. This is a reunion between old friends, yet you couldn't even say a few polite words before resorting to violence." The guoshi smiled. "General Gu's become so impatient. Who's been spoiling you?"

"What's it to you?"

"Ooh." The guoshi's smile grew more brilliant. "So stubborn. It seems our spies weren't lying when they said you'd recovered your memories—though I admit I'm surprised you forgot all you did in the Liao Kingdom when you returned to Chonghua. Did you really forget how you used to scheme and kill on my behalf?"

Gu Mang said nothing.

"Did you really forget how many of Chonghua's men and women died under your blade? How many battles you led our people to win?"

Gu Mang raised a hand, running his fingers along the dagger Yongye inch by inch, spiritual energy sparking everywhere he touched. The light from the blade illuminated Gu Mang's sharp eyes. "I wouldn't tell you no matter what the answer was. But there is one thing I'm happy to share."

"What is it?"

"Guoshi, under normal circumstances, you definitely wouldn't talk so much."

His words still hung in the air as Gu Mang charged toward the guoshi like the spring of a panther. With a *clang* and a hasty strum of the strings, the nine-eyed qin produced a golden barrier that crashed against Gu Mang's dagger. Sparks flew, both demonic weapons shrilling as the light from their collision shone in their wielders' eyes.

As expected… With that blow, Gu Mang sensed the guoshi's exhaustion. To recover the remnant of the Demonblood Beast Jingchen's soul as quickly as possible, the guoshi had played the nine-eyed qin two days and a night without rest. He was still fearsome, but his spiritual energy had been drained far below his usual level. He was deliberately stalling for time in an attempt to regain a bit of energy.

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Why would Gu Mang allow him to succeed? He shot toward the guoshi with a series of killing moves, ordering the enthralled cultivators to coordinate their motions with his own. A chill wind swirled to life inside the governor's mansion as demonic aura surged in waves.

"Good technique," the guoshi said in praise as he played. Just as Gu Mang was about to land another blow, he shouted: "Hoarfrost, come!"

Another eye on the nine-eyed qin blinked open. Sensing movement by his feet, Gu Mang leapt into the air. Dozens of blade-sharp icicles shot out of the ground where he'd been standing. Had he been a moment slower, he would've been impaled many times over.

Gu Mang didn't dare drop his guard. Every muscle tensed as he watched the guoshi's movements with clear blue eyes.

The nine-eyed qin…the nine-eyed qin…

He racked his brain for any details about this demonic qin. He had lived in the Liao Kingdom for five years, after all. He ought to be aware of this qin's abilities…

"Mngh!" Bone-deep agony spiked through his head when he tried to think. The sound of that demon qin was like a blade piercing his mind; he was soaked in cold sweat.

The nine-eyed qin.

Two more heavy strums reverberated through the air. The guoshi plucked the strings faster. Shards of ice burst through the paving stones, impaling three of the slower cultivators. Gore spattered, arcing over Gu Mang. The pungent scent of copper intensified the pain spasming through Gu Mang's head.

The nine-eyed qin…

Scenes flashed through his muddled mind.

The great hall of the Liao Kingdom, the guoshi playing the human-skinned qin as he smiled. "This demonic weapon is my masterpiece. It has nine eyes, each belonging to an exceptionally talented cultivator. Some communicate with the spirits of godly beasts, some attack with spikes of ice… Keeping this qin with me is as good as having those nine skilled experts at my side—far stronger than any regular guard."

That was right—the guoshi of the Liao Kingdom possessed this perverse ability. He could store someone's techniques within their eye, then embed it into the nine-eyed qin.

In Gu Mang's memories, the guoshi laughed cruelly. "These nine eyes change over time. If I discover a more powerful cultivator, I discard the least useful and replace it with a new one. Over and over again. The nine-eyed qin will grow stronger and stronger, until it is truly invincible…"

In Gu Mang's moment of distraction, yet more spikes broke through the floor, stabbing the last few cultivators to death before shooting toward him. Gu Mang leapt onto the roof beams to catch his breath. His eyes swept over the scene beneath his feet. The Demonblood Beast Jingchen was protected behind the guoshi's barrier; continuing to fight like this would give him no chance to use the soul-seeking rope.

He closed his eyes as the guoshi's qin music changed. This melody was endlessly chilling, like the writhing dance of monsters and ghosts. Gu Mang groaned. The demonic qi in his chest roiled and surged as the sound of the qin drew it outward.

The guoshi laughed under his breath. "General Gu, I told you this five years ago: when you agreed to have black magic spiritual energy injected into your body, you became a monster, neither human nor demon. I told you. In all the Nine Provinces, only my Liao would accept you."

Gu Mang fell to one knee on the beam, hand braced on the wooden pillar. He panted and ground his teeth.

"Did you think I kept so few guards with me because I'm skilled? Not so. I've been waiting all along. Even when they told me you sustained heavy injuries, that there was no chance you would come to the front lines, reality has proven them wrong. They underestimated Jiang Fuli's healing skill—and your *courage*."

The guoshi lowered himself to sit calmly down by Jingchen's side. "I, for one, was certain you would come. Did you imagine I was stalling for time to gather my spiritual energy? I simply wanted to make you use a few more moves and stir up the demonic qi in your body."

The qin music produced by his fingers became eerier still, as if it had become a pair of intangible deer-bone claws peeling away the layers of

demonic qi in Gu Mang's body, enticing the demon out of its cage.

The guoshi smiled devilishly. "Gu Mang, why are you stubborn? Why not just live as you'd like?"

The notes rose to a crescendo; Gu Mang screamed, doubled over in agony. He dropped like a stone from the roof beam with an excruciating *thud*. He panted hard on the ground, his face terrifyingly pale and eyes unfocused as he gazed toward the guqin. "Stop playing…" His lips tremored as cold sweat streamed down his brow. "Stop… Please…*please*—"

With his last agonized wail, a burst of cold light glared in his hand. Gu Mang leapt up from the floor, taking advantage of the guoshi's momentary lapse in vigilance to fly toward the barrier. "Yongye, Temper Spirit!"

The dagger Yongye exploded with blinding light. Gu Mang poured all of his demonic energy into one vicious strike.

Gold and black intertwined, spiritual energy flows flickering in the moment they clashed. The barrier created by the nine-eyed qin creaked dangerously before shattering to pieces.

Gu Mang uncoiled the soul-seeking rope at his waist, his gaze as sharp as a blade. With lightning speed, he bound the Demonblood Beast Jingchen curled up in the corner.

The guoshi paled. Behind the mask, his expression turned malevolent. "Gu Mang!" He gritted his teeth. "You little—"

You little what? The black magic was wreaking havoc on Gu Mang's mind; he was teetering on the edge of insanity, but his resolve was strong as steel. He pushed past the agony. He hadn't feigned his suffering for the opportunity to take the soul; he'd broken the barrier through sheer force of will. Even the guoshi didn't know what invective to hurl at him.

He needed to recapture the beast, but Gu Mang wasn't going to make it easy. He'd already bound Jingchen within his qiankun pouch. Staggering, Gu Mang rose to his feet and swiped away the blood at the corner of his mouth, staring the guoshi down with blazing eyes. His face, lined with anguish from the torment of the demonic qi, bloomed in a fierce yet

brilliantly self-satisfied smile. “It doesn’t matter if the Nine Provinces want me or not. What matters is, bro, this world doesn’t want you either.”

He leapt up with that wisp of the Demonblood Beast’s soul, speeding back toward the army of Chonghua.

But how could the guoshi allow him to go? His narrowed eyes sparked with flame as he snapped his fingers and shouted, “Snowdrift, come!”

The third eye on the nine-eyed qin blinked open. Blustering wind and wintry snow enveloped the guoshi’s body. Striding out of the hall, he waved a hand; thunder rumbled in answer. He slammed a command talisman into the earth.

In moments, a group of elite black magic soldiers rushed over in answer. One by one, they knelt before him. “Awaiting Guoshi’s orders!”

“The wisp of the Demonblood Beast’s soul was taken by that Gu brat,” the guoshi snarled. “He’s trying to get out of the city. Track the aura of the Demonblood Beast on him—follow me.”

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Chapter 151:
Lone Wolf Unsealed

GU MANG FLEW over the ridges of the rooftops, breathing hard. The night wind swept through his black clothes. Beneath the golden mask, his brilliant smugness had long since twisted into pain.

His head was pounding, his memories disordered and chaotic. The black magic qi in his body was breaking out of his control; he didn't know how much longer he could endure. At the very least, he needed to bring the Demonblood Beast to Chonghua's camp.

His blue eyes glanced back; he sharply sensed that the guoshi and his black magic soldiers were gaining on him. At this rate, he wouldn't make it to where Mo Xi was stationed in the north of the city. His only option was to flee for the city gates.

"Gu Mang, how long will you persist? Chonghua gave you the title of 'Beast of the Altar'—are you going to be their dog for a lifetime?"

The guoshi was still far behind, but his voice, enchanted to travel, whispered in Gu Mang's ears, drilling into his head. Gu Mang shoved his increasingly disordered thoughts to the back of his mind. "I'm fighting for my goddamn self," he bit out. "Who's your fucking dog?!"

He used qinggong to spring forward again, hurtling toward the city gates as if flying. The two armies were locked in fierce combat there, fiery light exploding around them. The wind whistled past his ears as he closed in on the gates.

At that moment, the guoshi of the Liao Kingdom, aided by Snowdrift, finally overtook him. Loose robes billowed as he soared toward Gu Mang like a fluttering paper kite.

"Snowdrift was the technique of the top qinggong grandmaster of Lichun," the guoshi sneered behind him. "Gu Mang, did you really think you could escape?"

Cold sweat stood out on Gu Mang's forehead. Suddenly, he caught a glimpse of the ignition talismans fluttering above the inner city walls.

Pivoting midair, he arrowed toward those paper talismans.

That hint of a calm smile on the guoshi's lips faded as he saw Gu Mang alight safely atop the city wall and come to a stop.

Gu Mang turned, face half in shadow. "Hey. Why don't we see which of us is crazier?"

"Gu Mang!" The guoshi shouted as realization dawned. "You—!"

Whipped by the furious wind, Gu Mang smiled scornfully, raising a hand and pointing along the wall.

Flames flew up from his fingertip; in the moment they struck, the walls detonated into a magnificent explosion. The guoshi swore as he was forced to dart backward. Firelight shot toward the heavens, sending up searing gusts of heat.

As the talismans ignited, Gu Mang likewise tensed and leapt back. More colossal blasts followed, brick and stone flying. Scorched air filled the skies, separating him from his Liao Kingdom pursuers.

The maneuver was incredibly dangerous. Though Gu Mang retreated immediately, the blast flung him down from the rooftops. He ignored the ensuing pain, rolling onto all fours and dragging his wounded body forward in escape before the guoshi caught up.

The flash of spells and curses grew brighter, shining in his eyes as the sounds of two armies cutting each other down roared in his ears. With a last desperate leap, Gu Mang launched himself forward with one hand and broke through the unprepared Liao Kingdom defense troops, charging into the battle formations of Chonghua.

The earth beyond the city gates had long since become a sea of blood, the fires of war illuminating half the night sky to noonday brightness. Amid the roiling smoke, Chonghua's cultivators fought the Liao army. All around was the clashing of spells and the howling of spiritual beasts, wild-eyed soldiers and splattered blood.

Gu Mang's chest heaved. He felt no relief at having made it this far. His field of vision seemed to narrow, as if the black magic demonic energy pressed in on him, ready to swallow him and wrest away his mind. He

widened anxious eyes, seeking the general's banner amid the chaos of battle —

There.

A chill wind rose behind him. He sensed the furious guoshi had forded the sea of fire and was once more gaining on him. Out of options, Gu Mang shouted, *"Murong Lian!"*

Murong Lian was leading the attack on the main gates. He was presently seated astride his golden-winged snow pegasus, watching indifferently from behind the barrier erected by the defense cultivators without the slightest inclination to join the fray. He bit down on his pipe, squinting at the field as he smoked his ephemera. Caught off guard by Gu Mang's desperate shout, he started and broke into a fit of coughing. Hazy peach-blossom eyes lifted toward the disordered troops.

A high-level cultivator of the Liao Kingdom in white and gold swept forward like a ghost, pursuing one of Xihe-jun's attendants. The shout had come from this bedraggled little guard as he ran.

"What's going on?" Murong Lian muttered.

"Take this qiankun pouch!" the guard yelled, pelting through the heavy fires of war toward Murong Lian, eyes worried and urgent. "Bring it to Mo Xi!"

"Don't even think about it!" The guoshi swooped elegantly to the ground, hand striking out like lightning to grab Gu Mang's shoulder. Gu Mang struck back, and the two exchanged a dozen blows in a blink.

The guoshi's energy was depleted, but Gu Mang was the more wounded; he swiftly gave ground, backing away toward Murong Lian's barrier. Gu Mang turned and held out the qiankun pouch containing the wisp of Demonblood soul and shouted, "Go, quick!"

But Murong Lian was a profoundly cautious person. Wary of a trick, he ignored the pouch, staring at Gu Mang. "The spells you use are black magic techniques of the Liao Kingdom."

"I…"

Murong Lian narrowed his eyes. "How do I know you're not a decoy from the Liao army?"

Gu Mang was incapable of explaining himself. He could only use techniques from the Liao Kingdom—his spiritual core was destroyed; he had no way of casting any of Chonghua's spells. What could he say to prove himself? He parried the guoshi's attacks as his mind raced, his blue eyes frantic.

The guoshi pressed in, chuckling softly in Gu Mang's ear. "What did I say? As long as black magic runs through your blood, there will be nowhere you're welcome within all the Nine Provinces…other than Liao."

With that, he made a grab for that remnant of soul. Gu Mang jumped back, twisting and bringing the qiankun pouch to his chest once more. This move saved the pouch, but he couldn't evade the guoshi's strike. In the moment he moved to duck, his vision blurred, and the guoshi's spell struck his waist.

Gu Mang vomited up a mouthful of blood, falling to his knees outside that barrier flowing with blue light. He looked up to meet Murong Lian's fickle gaze.

He couldn't reveal his identity; if he did, any soldiers of Chonghua within earshot would undoubtedly riot. But he couldn't otherwise explain why he used the black magic spells of the Liao Kingdom. His bloodstained lips trembled as they parted, his fingertips touching the glowing barrier.

Murong Lian watched him. The man's mask concealed his features completely. Even the unmistakable blue of Gu Mang's eyes was hidden by an enchantment so as not to betray his identity. Murong Lian hesitated; he felt vaguely that this person's gaze was familiar.

A chill ran up his spine as the guard spoke in a low voice. "I came to your manor that day…because I missed her so much."

"…What did you say?"

The attendant rasped only two words, more than enough to prove his identity to Murong Lian: "Auntie Ni…"

Murong Lian felt he'd been struck by lightning. *Gu Mang?!*

In the same moment, the guoshi's second blow landed. Blood sprayed into the air. In that flickering instant, Murong Lian's barrier flashed open, but he had no time to bring Gu Mang inside. As soon as Gu Mang threw the

qiankun pouch within its bounds, the guoshi's next strike hit him in the back. If not for the guoshi moderating his power out of worry for that wisp of soul, Gu Mang might have perished then and there.

Murong Lian's face was deathly pale as he repaired the barrier with a wave of his hand, watching Gu Mang spit more blood in the dirt.

"Take it to Xihe-jun…"

"You—"

"You don't understand his magic, you're no match for him." Gu Mang gasped. "Go!"

Murong Lian stood rooted in place, speechless.

"What are you waiting for?" Gu Mang cried. "Do you hate me so much?!"

Complicated light flashed in Murong Lian's eyes. He bit his lower lip and directed an attendant to bring him the qiankun pouch from the ground. Murong Lian's fingers tightened around it. The pouch had been dyed scarlet by hot blood, and a malevolent spiritual energy was indeed surging inside it. Murong Lian's heart pounded, though he was unsure what he felt.

"Get out of here!" Gu Mang bellowed. "If I can't hold him off, you'll be next!"

The attendants had no idea what was going on, much less what secret code this golden-masked guard had exchanged with Wangshu-jun. Murong Lian's expression was unreadable. Eventually he stuffed the pouch into his robes and called a command to the imperial defense cultivators beside him. "Retreat to the northern gate! Join Xihe-jun as reinforcements!"

"Yes sir!"

The guoshi's expression turned vicious. The Liao Kingdom cultivators he'd brought had finally caught up to him; the group immediately moved to stop Murong Lian.

Gu Mang wiped away the blood at his mouth and began drawing a sigil on his chest, stroke by stroke…

"No!" The guoshi leapt back. In the same instant, a colossal burst of black magic qi surged like crashing waves and exploded from Gu Mang's

body. His pupils flashed with lupine blue light as flames in the shape of a wolf soared up behind him.

The guoshi never expected this move—as soon as Gu Mang used it, he was doomed to be consumed by black magic. On top of that, it might be a killing blow, but its effect would last an incense time at most.

Blood oozed from Gu Mang's parted lips. He stood between the guoshi and Murong Lian in retreat, surrounded by a haze of dust, blue eyes glinting as he looked up. Three menacing words rang out: "Lone Wolf. Unseal!"

A wild wind whipped to life, mist coalescing from nothing as the howling of countless wolves seemed to echo from the bowels of the earth. Sand and stone flew up, swirling around Gu Mang.

The guoshi's eyes blazed as he gnashed his teeth. "Good…very good. To think you actually refined this technique. Gu Mang, I *did* underestimate you. You really are…a man to be feared! You must be aware—after this move, you'll never cast spells again, whether black magic or techniques from Chonghua. You've bought yourself a few minutes… What do you plan to do after?!"

Gu Mang raised his chin, his features set in vicious resolve and indomitable arrogance. "Don't worry about what I'll do after. Just focus on whether it'll hurt when I beat you the hell up."

The guoshi sneered. "A rash decision."

"But I'm having fun." The silhouette blazing with faewolf qi arced into the air. Like an arrow loosed from its bow, it shot toward the guoshi where he stood on the ground.

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Chapter 152:
Confrontation Before the Troops

LEAVING GU MANG locked in fierce combat with the guoshi, Murong Lian wasted no time. Taking the brocade pouch, he and his retinue sped toward Mo Xi in the north of the city astride their pegasi.

The escape did not go smoothly. The city gates were not far from Mo Xi's position, but the fires of war raged everywhere, and at every turn the Liao Kingdom cultivators obstructed them. Neither side lacked experts; the cultivators with the guoshi were all the most terrifying suicide soldiers the Liao Kingdom had trained. No matter how elite Murong Lian's subordinates, these black magic cultivators sent them scrambling. By the time Murong Lian made it to the apricot forest on the outskirts of the city, his protective barrier was in tatters and most of his guards had been injured and fallen behind. He didn't dare meet his enemies head-on; it was all he could do to use the winding terrain of the forest to evade his pursuers.

"I've long heard Wangshu-jun is a useless wastrel. It's fine to be a fool, but his skills in magic are unimpressive too. Ridiculous."

The leader of these Liao cultivators was a woman with a braided whip at her waist. She leapt into the branches, filling the forest with her magically amplified snickering. "Murong Lian, you've reached a dead end. Where do you plan to flee?"

"Your ge likes to ride fast horses and go on long walks," Murong Lian replied as he spurred his pegasus through the trees. "What's it to you?"

"Fucking whore—still mouthing off so hard even when you're staring death in the face."

"Another part of me is even harder… Would you like to see for yourself?"

"You!" The Liao Kingdom cultivator hadn't expected Murong Lian to be *this* shameless. She flushed with fury and cracked her whip. "Pervert!"

Murong Lian galloped ahead, narrowly dodging the lash. "You missed," he taunted. "Was it on purpose? For shame. Instead of taking your

guoshi's orders seriously, you're over here play-fighting and flirting. Honestly, you're not my type. Your face is all right, but your waist is too thick and your chest is too flat."

"Murong Lian! *I'll kill you!*"

Murong Lian rolled his eyes. "This is why I don't like women as subordinates. It merely takes a bit of chatter for them to forget they're supposed to seize the pouch, not kill the man."

The cultivator's face twisted in an ugly expression; she looked ready to spit blood. "I can kill you *and* take the pouch!"

"Darling, you're *so* talented," Murong Lian said carelessly. "Have at it."

The cultivator screamed with rage and sped faster after him. The other Liao cultivators shouted, "Qi-niang, calm down!"

At the same time, Murong Lian's guards cried, "My lord, watch out!"

Her whip-lashes fell like rain, tearing toward the snowy pegasus Murong Lian rode. But her strikes were reckless in her fury; Murong Lian evaded with ease.

Still, he didn't dare relax. He urged his pegasus to a faster gallop through the misty woods. As they reached the edge of the apricot forest, he yanked back on the reins and shouted, "Up!"

Finally in open terrain, the white pegasus stretched its wings. Wind buffeted its golden feathers as it rose into the clouds, carrying its master toward the fighting at the north of the city.

Flying was faster than galloping, but Murong Lian's pursuers now had a clear line of sight. Multiple spells missed by nerve-rackingly narrow margins as they shot past his shoulders. As the bright lights of the northern camp drew closer, the strikes from behind Murong Lian became frantic. Moments from touching down within the Northern Frontier Army's troops, Qi-niang's braided whip wrapped viciously around the snowy pegasus's hind leg and yanked backward.

The spiritual horse whinnied. Murong Lian was flung off its back, tumbling pathetically into the mud with a series of racking coughs.

Before he could stand, the Liao cultivators landed beside him, their eyes gleaming—with the exception of Qi-niang, whose eyes sparked with ominous fury. Through gritted teeth she said, “How about I cut out your tongue!”

But Murong Lian was born with a nasty mouth. Even his sorry state couldn’t stop him from sneering: “What do you want my tongue for, huh? To cup in your hands and lick every day?”

Qi-niang’s pretty face turned green with disgust. She was one of the highest-ranked guards in the entire Liao army; her subordinates addressed her with a respectful “jie” or a deferential “Qi-niang.” Never had she suffered this level of verbal humiliation. She rushed toward Murong Lian, intending to mince him to bits.

Two of the guards accompanying Murong Lian finally broke through the woods behind them. Seeing their master in danger, they shot forward and cast a barrier before Murong Lian just as Qi-niang was about to smash a palmful of spiritual energy down on him.

“My lord, get away!”

“Hurry and escape!”

Murong Lian crawled to his feet, still coughing. His martial abilities had once been much better, before years of ephemera use sapped his spiritual energy and stamina. He glanced back at the two guards and ran in the direction of the barracks clutching the qiankun pouch. But he’d taken no more than a few steps when he tasted a metallic bitterness in the back of his throat. He doubled over, retching up a mouthful of blood.

His guards had no strength remaining; they could only stall for time to allow Murong Lian to escape. None of them expected Murong Lian’s illness to flare up *now*.

With an explosive *boom*, the light array barrier shielding him burst apart. Severely wounded, the two guards crumpled as the demonic cultivators of the Liao Kingdom lunged for Murong Lian once more.

Murong Lian had fallen to the ground, his pale face mottled with blood. He swore under his breath, half a sigil hovering at his fingertips as he planned to make one last stand.

Suddenly, a wall of blazing scarlet fell from the sky and barred the way before the Liao cultivators. The earth rumbled and smoke rose as wind gusted from that wall of flame and threw flickering orange sparks in all directions. Above that fiery wall, a man in fluttering black robes stood against the wind, scepter held horizontally before him as flames lapped at his feet.

"Xihe-jun…"

Mo Xi stood at the apex of those roiling spiritual flames, Tuntian growing more brilliant in his hand. With one touch, fire erupted behind him, transforming into the shape of a massive whale and illuminating the vault of the heavens.

"You stand before the Northern Frontier Army. Don't even dream of taking another step." Mo Xi looked down from on high as the colossal whale soared behind him. It hadn't yet targeted anyone, but everyone knew the nature of this weapon's terrifying killing blow in the hands of Chonghua's Xihe-jun.

"It ends here," Mo Xi coldly pronounced.

Before Qi-niang and the others could move, they heard a deafening cry. Through the towering wall of flame, innumerable cultivators of the Northern Frontier Army advanced in the wake of their commander, along with thousands of prancing horses.

In the blink of an eye, the tables had turned completely.

Murong Lian looked at Chonghua's cultivators filling the horizon, then up at Mo Xi's silhouette. Finally, he let out a breath. Murong Lian reached up, hand trembling from the flare-up of his illness, and took out the brocade pouch holding the remnant of the Demonblood Beast's soul. Coughing, he said reluctantly, "This is—what he brought for you. From the mission you gave him."

Gu Mang was infamous. Neither Murong Lian nor Mo Xi could directly say his name before the troops; doing so would incite a riot. But Mo Xi's expression visibly shifted. "Where is he?" he asked.

Murong Lian's lips moved. Before he could answer, a voice as ghastly as a ghoul's filled the night sky with a voice-amplification

technique: “He’s in my hands. Be good and give that brocade pouch to me. Or else…”

As that devilish voice circled them like a vulture, a man in white and gold robes floated down from the darkness and alighted gracefully in the canopy of the closest banyan tree. In his arms was an attendant from Chonghua, limp as cotton rags—unconscious.

Murong Lian started. *Gu Mang?!*

Mo Xi’s face had drained of color. It was Gu Mang… Gu Mang, who had spent all his demonic energy in a final salvo to stall for time…

The guoshi licked his lips. Upon him were all the signs of a bitter fight: his clothes were stained with blood, and a deep gash rent his shoulder. But through the mask, his eyes were as darkly cold and composed as ever. It wasn’t that he was relaxed, but as if an eerie calmness was carved into his bones—as if he had experienced things most could never dream of.

“Or else, Xihe-jun,” the guoshi smiled. “I will teach you the meaning of regret.”

By now Mengze had arrived with her Scarlet-Plumed Battalion. She wore a set of black and gold robes embroidered with pythons, tailored at the waist, with her dark hair tied high. Tens of thousands of cavalry followed majestically behind her. She exclaimed in shock, “What’s going on?”

Mo Xi’s mouth tightened; he didn’t answer. His eyes never left Gu Mang. The scepter in his hand blazed more and more fiercely.

Seeing that Mo Xi intended to use a killing move, the guoshi lifted Gu Mang higher with one hand, conjuring a dagger in the other. He pressed the blade to Gu Mang’s neck and grinned. “Oh, are you going to strike me down? What do you think is faster? Your spells or my blade?”

“Let him go!” Mo Xi snarled.

“Easy enough,” the guoshi drawled. “What use do I have for him? I only want that brocade pouch. Here’s a fair trade: you give that item to me, and I’ll give this person to you. Unless…you don’t think he’s worth the price?”

Their surroundings gradually quieted. Both the soldiers and their leaders stared at this bizarre scene before them, dumbfounded—and no

wonder. They'd fought in many battles with Xihe-jun over the years, yet never had their commander wasted so much breath before attacking a foe. This stand-off was truly inexplicable. Wangshu-jun, the guoshi of the Liao Kingdom, and their stepdad all seemed to be talking in code. What brocade pouch? Who was this guard that had been taken hostage? Why would the guoshi use him as leverage against Xihe-jun?

Silence fell. The battlefield was terrifyingly quiet, almost all the eyes of those cultivators gathered on this handful of people, waiting for Mo Xi's response.

The guoshi pressed the tip of the dagger to Gu Mang's cheek, lifting his lolling head. The mask over his face was soaked with scarlet blood. "Xihe-jun, look at him. How long do you think you can stall for? Be a dear and hand over that brocade pouch. Once he's dead, it'll be too late for regrets."

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Chapter 153:
Retaking the Hostage

MURONG LIAN WAS TERRIFIED of losing control of the situation before the troops. Gripping the brocade pouch, he turned to Mo Xi. “Fireball, don’t get confused. He suffered those injuries all to bring you this qiankun pouch. If you hand it over, he’ll loathe you for it once he wakes up.”

After a moment of silence, Mo Xi said, “If I don’t hand it over, I’ll loathe myself.”

He lifted a hand and pointed. A jet of flames licked out from the wall of fire, setting Murong Lian alight. Murong Lian flinched in pain and loosened his grip; in an instant, the spiritual flames sent the qiankun pouch holding the remnant of the Demonblood Beast’s soul flying swiftly into Mo Xi’s hand.

“Mo Xi, you—!”

Murong Lian was furious, but more than that, he was shocked. Given the choice between his duty to his nation and his brother’s life, he chose the latter. For any commander, this was a major taboo, a severe mistake. Any general who placed the highest priority on personal relationships would bring down irreversible catastrophe on their soldiers and their nation. Mo Xi had led troops for so many years; it was impossible that he didn’t understand this principle. How could he—

Before Murong Lian could finish the thought, the vast wall of flame dimmed. Mo Xi descended from the cresting waves of fire, his steel-toed military boots stepping over scorched earth. Before everyone’s stupefied eyes, he walked toward the guoshi, stride by stride, holding the brocade pouch.

The guoshi retracted his dagger and brought one hand up to grasp Gu Mang by the neck, reaching the other toward Mo Xi. “Hand it to me.”

“Send him over first.”

These words seemed to amuse the guoshi; he looked down and ran his tongue over white teeth before baring them in a ghoulish smile. “Xihe-jun…how young you are. You’ve yet to learn what it feels like to make an irrevocable mistake.” He lowered pitch-black lashes. “Since you’re being such a good boy, why don’t I give you some advice?”

Mo Xi remained silent.

“When someone very important to you is in another’s hands,” he murmured, slowly running his fingertips over Gu Mang’s neck, “it’s best to accept the conditions they give you. Unless you don’t actually care for his life.”

Pausing, the guoshi pulled Gu Mang closer, his eyes overflowing with malice. “Come.” He tilted Gu Mang’s chin up. “I’ll give you one last chance. Give the qiankun pouch to me.”

This time, even the befuddled foot soldiers could see what was happening. It seemed their Xihe-jun was about to give up something crucial to Chonghua in exchange for that person in the guoshi’s hands. But seeing wasn’t yet believing; no one knew what to think. They had come so far and fought such a bloody battle; so many comrades had perished in the process. Yet Xihe-jun would write off all their losses…for just one person?

The guoshi raised a finger. “Quickly now.”

All eyes were on Mo Xi as he walked over to the guoshi. After a moment of silence, he held out the qiankun pouch—

Just as the guoshi’s fingers would have brushed the brocade, Mo Xi’s eyes sharpened. *“Invoke!”*

The guoshi had only allowed him so close because he was watching Mo Xi’s every move. If Mo Xi was to attack, there would be a tell, no matter how minute. He had expected Mo Xi’s shout. The guoshi lifted his palm with an array, and a glistening defense barrier sprang up between him and Mo Xi. “A trick? You’re still too—”

A cold gust brushed his side. Before the guoshi could react, dozens of blue sword glares erupted from the man in his arms.

The lotus sword array!

That protective array Gu Mang and Mo Xi had left on each other's bodies when their love was still young obeyed Mo Xi's command and burst forth.

In such close proximity, caught so completely off guard, even the guoshi had no time to dodge. Blood splashed onto the battlefield.

Everyone cried out in alarm.

Mo Xi seized his chance; he broke through the guoshi's barrier and swiftly pulled Gu Mang into his arms. The sword array recognized its master; those swords of light sharp enough to split hairs transformed into countless glimmering feathers the instant they touched Mo Xi, fluttering down around them. Amid that cascade of flickering feathers, with one hand gripping the qiankun pouch and the other firmly around Gu Mang, Mo Xi leapt backward and landed before the army of Chonghua.

"Shixiong." Mo Xi gently touched Gu Mang's cheek, murmuring in a voice so low it was hardly audible, "It's over now…"

But the guoshi's strength was truly terrifying. After forgoing sleep and playing the qin to rouse the Demonblood Beast's soul, after fighting Gu Mang with nothing held in reserve, after expending so much of his vital energy, still he managed to divert the sword array. It had only wounded his shoulder, dripping with blood. He paid it no mind, his vulture-like eyes flashing with a sharp madness.

"Very well…very well! Ha ha ha—" He laughed raucously, his voice dripping venom. "I hadn't expected someone so righteous as Xihe-jun to pull this kind of cruel trick! Truly, you're full of surprises!"

Who would stand for these insults? Mo Xi never had any plans to offer up the qiankun pouch, and he even successfully rescued the captured guard. The arrayed cultivators of Chonghua let out a combined sigh of relief, many deeply ashamed at the assumptions they'd made. Some low-level cultivators couldn't hold themselves back and shouted at the guoshi: "Shut the fuck up! Saying our General Mo is cruel just because he beat you —how shameless!"

"You took a hostage; are you not the cruel one?"

"Exactly!"

Mengze, never forgetting her role as a healer, ordered her subordinates to treat Murong Lian and his guards at once. She went personally to Mo Xi. “I’ll treat his wounds,” she said quietly.

Mo Xi couldn’t help but fret at Gu Mang’s condition; Mengze looking after him would be ideal. He nodded. “Thank you.”

Under Mengze’s orders, her attendants brought Gu Mang into the ranks of the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion. She immediately began directing the healers on how to stop his bleeding and treat his wounds. Mo Xi watched Gu Mang for a while longer; he had just turned his head to give instructions to the messengers when the guoshi’s jeering voice cut in.

“Ha ha ha, yes, all of you are right. Xihe-jun is honorable and pure, righteous and noble…” Amplified by magic, eerie echoes of those words spiraled through the battlefield. “But I wonder if you honorable gentlemen know—this Xihe-jun of yours, renowned for his virtue, let a filthy traitor wear a mask to act as his personal attendant.”

The troops fell silent. Gradually, a disturbance rippled outward.

The guoshi smiled wickedly. He addressed the entire battlefield. “Are you shocked? Surprised? The pillar of your nation, that saintly gentleman of yours, deceives you into dying for him on the battlefield while sharing a clandestine relationship with a traitorous turncoat. They’ve even placed a blood-contract sigil on each other’s bodies—how incomparably *intimate*.”

Those low-level cultivators shouted with rage, “You’re lying!”

But the guoshi only smiled. “Aiya, I’m an honest man. I never lie. But if you gentlemen don’t believe me, why don’t you ask him to take off that guard’s mask and show you his face? Should we see if this person who bears the mark of your General Mo is the former commander you all despise…Gu Mang?”

A clamor rose from the ranks.

The guoshi knew how to choose his battles. Drained of spiritual energy and facing an unfavorable situation, he preferred not to fight. After saying his piece, he swept his sleeves back and took to the skies with his retinue of elite Liao cultivators, vanishing into the night with a bound. All he left behind was the sound of his laughter reverberating through the

clouds, unrestrained in its malice, as that shocking truth echoed endlessly among the troops.

The three armies of Chonghua were silent. Being a newly composed army, the Winged Cavalry led by Murong Lian had no direct experience with Gu Mang, and so remained simply astonished. But the expressions of many soldiers from Mo Xi's Northern Frontier Army changed in an instant. Feet rooted to the ground, they swayed from the shock.

Murong Mengze's Scarlet-Plumed Battalion was the most impassioned. The cultivators from this army were all noble born; many had kin who had died at Gu Mang's hand. Upon hearing that this masked guard was their most hated nemesis, they exploded into chaos.

"Xihe-jun! Is it true?!"

"Who is this person!"

The cultivator charged with healing Gu Mang happened to be one of those who bore him a deep grudge. He immediately reached out to take off Gu Mang's mask. But at the moment he touched the rim, a beam of feeble jade-blue light stung his fingertips.

That cultivator jerked his head up to find the one who stopped him was none other than Murong Mengze. "Princess…?!"

"If the commander's attendant wears a mask, his identity is a secret," Mengze said. "Unless it is by the commander's will or by His Imperial Majesty's order, no one may take it off."

"If he's really Gu Mang," the healer cried out, "why can't we take it off?!"

"But what if he isn't?" Mengze countered.

The healer fell silent.

"Have you so lost sight of national law that you would oppose your own commander on the word of a stranger from Liao?"

"But—"

"Take him away!"

"Understood!"

The attendants stepped forward to escort the disorderly healer to the back of the ranks.

The princess had intervened, and Gu Mang's mask was not removed before the eyes of the three armies—but it didn't matter. Mo Xi was a decisive person. He did not tolerate misunderstandings, especially ones that so severely threatened morale. If what the mask concealed wasn't Gu Mang's face, Mo Xi's temperament would have led him to remove it to settle the disturbance.

But he did not do so. Almost everyone understood there could be only one reason—the guoshi was right. The person beneath the mask was none other than the traitorous Gu Mang.

The battle was won, but the army's morale was shot. Mo Xi's military achievement was impressive enough that no one dared to make a fuss in public, but gossip and rumors swirled incessantly. Some guessed at their relationship, others cursed them in private, and still more made unflattering conjectures about their motives. These currents eddied and whirled into an undertow that flowed between the cultivators of all three armies.

Never had a victorious battle taken such a toll on Mo Xi. The Liao Kingdom withdrew their troops from Da'ze, and the cultivators of Chonghua retook the city. Mo Xi was in no hurry to ride back to the capital; instead, he led the army's efforts to settle the refugees and help the surviving civilians in Da'ze rebuild their homes. But when he walked through the debris left by the battle, he was no longer treated with the same reverence as before. The gazes around him were full of secret judgment.

For his part, Mo Xi felt no sadness at his current situation; he had experienced similar a long time ago. He had learned all there was to know about the fickle nature of public favor at the age of seven, when his father passed. His fall from grace back then had been far more dramatic. Now, all his sorrow was reserved for that Gu Mang on everyone's lips—in their eyes and through their whispers, he could tell how they detested him, while he understood the truth yet couldn't make it known.

"How is he today?"

The aftermath of the victory at Da’ze and the chaos in the army had left Mo Xi too occupied to stay at Gu Mang’s side. He didn’t dare hand him over to anyone else for treatment, so the task had fallen to Murong Mengze.

Mo Xi told Mengze all the secrets he couldn’t entrust to anyone else. She’d been shocked upon finding Gu Mang had been a spy and felt a deep regret for how she had regarded him previously. For this reason, Mo Xi was willing to let her treat him.

Mengze looked up, exhaustion written across her face. “Nothing major at the moment, but I can sense how that final black magic technique eroded his mind. The demonic qi is more difficult to control than before… I don’t know how much longer it can be suppressed.”

Mo Xi closed his eyes. “When the Liao Kingdom sent him back, it was because they knew his condition was growing more and more perilous. They dared not keep him nor kill him; they didn’t know what he’d become after he was consumed by black magic. They hid the truth, sending him back to Chonghua like a hot potato.”

Mengze said nothing.

“It’s no matter.” Mo Xi sighed. “Did he wake today?”

“He did, but his mind was muddled. He fell asleep again after some medicine.”

Bitterness filled Mo Xi’s throat. After a silence, he asked, “Are his memories…about to be lost?”

“Hard to say,” Mengze murmured. “When he was conscious, he talked to me for a little while. He probably still has some hazy recollections. Mo-dage, don’t lose heart.”

Mo Xi saw the shadows beneath her eyes; she’d hardly slept over the past few days. “Mengze, many thanks,” he murmured softly.

“I’m a healer; it’s my duty to provide care and treatment. There’s no need to thank me.”

Mo Xi shook his head. “Thank you for not taking offense at what I said to you in the war tent.”

Mengze fell quiet, lowering that face as graceful as pear blossoms under moonlight. Her voice was hoarse when she spoke again. “About what

you said… I don’t have much to take offense with. All these years, I’ve known you don’t like me that way. It was just… It was just that hearing you say that you have someone in your heart is still hard to accept.”

“…I’m sorry.”

Mengze was silent, looking down at her feet. After a long moment, she replied, “There’s no need to apologize. Feelings can’t be forced. The one who should be apologizing is me—it was I who was discourteous. In a moment of impulse, I said many rash words and embarrassed myself in front of Mo-dage. I made things difficult for you.” She paused, hanging her head. “I’m the one who let you down.”

The countries of the Nine Provinces that allowed female cultivators to hold positions of power were so few they could be counted on one hand, and Chonghua was not among them. Despite this, Murong Mengze still bore the title of one of the three gentlemen, Virtue, Mind, and Wisdom. She possessed extraordinary qualities. Even when she had moments of selfishness and weakness, she was never unreasonable.

Mengze looked up with a pained smile. “Dage, if you’re willing, in the future, you should…tell me who your heart belongs to. Even…if it’s unconventional, I think that…it couldn’t be wrong, if it’s the person you love.”

Mo Xi looked at her soft expression and said nothing. The army had been teeming with rumors recently; many had already speculated that he and Gu Mang had been involved for a long time. If such words had managed to reach even his ears, he could only guess how much Mengze had heard.

He didn’t know what else he could say to Mengze. She had done so much for him over the years, and he had already offered up all the thanks he could give, all the words he could say, all the promises he could make. It was only his love that he couldn’t extend. The two of them had at last reached an impasse. Every ounce of gratitude and regret Mo Xi harbored in his heart—he had voiced it all. To repeat himself would be meaningless.

And so he only said very sincerely, “I will.”

After a pause, he spoke again. “It’s gotten late, and you’ve had a long day as well. You should go back and rest. I’ll stay here to take care of him.”

Mengze’s eyes were wet. She looked at Mo Xi, then glanced at Gu Mang behind him, as if she wanted to speak. But in the end, she gave a low hum of assent before turning and leaving the tent.

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Chapter 154:
A-Lian Attacked

ONCE MORE, only the two of them remained.

Mo Xi crossed to the bed and sat down. He laid a hand on Gu Mang's forehead; it still felt warm, but less so than the past few days.

"Mengze said you woke up during the day. Maybe I'm just unlucky, because you're asleep every time I come to see you."

Mo Xi spoke at a whisper, as if hoping Gu Mang would hear yet fearful of disturbing him. No matter how strong someone was in other circumstances, they would always be weak when facing their beloved.

"The remnant of the Demonblood Beast's soul has been resealed, and very securely at that. You've succeeded at your mission again," Mo Xi said softly. "Oh, you—no matter how weighty the responsibility, no matter how impossible the task, you always finish the job. His Imperial Majesty never misjudged you… You're more capable than anyone else."

He lowered his head, pressing his forehead gently to Gu Mang's. "But when will you remember to show some care for yourself?"

The man lying on the bed was quiet, his long, soft lashes casting deep shadows under his eyes.

"You knew the black magic aura in you was no longer under control," Mo Xi murmured, "but still you unsealed the faewolf blood to buy time for Murong Lian to bring me the pouch." He let his lashes fall, eyes flickering uneasily beneath thin lids. "Shixiong…"

The slumbering man made no response. Mo Xi kept their foreheads pressed together. After a lapse, he said, "You've done everything you can. When we return to the capital, just focus on healing. Don't worry about anything else. I'll handle it all. I don't know how long I'll be able to protect you, but as long as I'm here, I won't let anyone bully you. Just…rest well."

He sat with Gu Mang a while longer. It was only when a messenger official brought in an urgent report concerning refugee arrangements in the

east of the city that he stood and left the tent.

The wind howled outside. The roar of the gale swept into the tent with the lifted flap, but after it lowered, the interior settled into silence again. Within this soundless tranquility, the lashes of the man on the bed fluttered; tears flowed down his soft cheeks into the hair at his temples. Gu Mang slowly opened his eyes.

He hadn’t been sleeping at all. In truth, every night when Mo Xi came to see him, he was awake. He didn’t know how to accept this, or how he was supposed to face Mo Xi.

He was unafraid of anything, save for saying farewell.

After he’d released the seal and roused his faewolf blood to fight the guoshi, black magic qi had rampaged through his body. He could feel his memories disappearing like snow collapsing down a mountainside—this wasn’t the kind of loss he could hide. If Mo Xi were to come see him while plagued by so many worries, only to discover his mind slipping away more each day, how would Mo Xi feel?

A quick beheading was a fate to be feared, but the sawing of a blunt knife through flesh was far more agonizing. Gu Mang couldn’t bear to put Mo Xi through this agony, and thus he chose not to speak to Mo Xi at all.

But when the tent was deserted in the dead of night, Gu Mang would rummage out that booklet of memories hidden deep within the bedding and carefully smooth the pages. Like a drowning man grasping at driftwood, he stubbornly pored over them again and again.

In the beginning, he could still recall the things he had written if he tried. But as days passed, the words set down seemed more and more like someone else’s story. Today he couldn’t remember the slightest detail about half of the book’s contents.

Gu Mang lifted that sheaf of papers, wrinkled from repeated reading, and pressed it to his chest. He clutched the pages with such force that tendons protruded from the backs of his hands, as if embracing those words could lock the fading memories into his heart.

Curled like this on the bed, he passed the night without a wink of sleep.

On the evening of the seventh day after the battle, the army settled their affairs in Da’ze City. The troops prepared to withdraw.

By now, very few of the memories the Time Mirror had flashed back to Gu Mang remained. Had he merely lost his memories, he could at least return to the state he was in prior to the journey to Bat Island. Yet this wasn’t the worst of it. Because the black magic in him could no longer be controlled, Gu Mang faced the possibility of his mind falling apart at any moment. Mengze dosed him with strong soothing medicines every day, which barely repressed his malevolent qi.

Tonight was no different. As usual, Gu Mang drank the medicine Mengze brought, then sat on the edge of the bed, hands fidgeting as he considered how he should face the next day.

He couldn’t pretend to sleep forever.

Sunk in his thoughts, he heard a personal guard speak up from outside. “Princess, Wangshu-jun requests an audience.”

Mengze was in the middle of tidying the medicines. Her hands stilled in surprise, gaze meeting Gu Mang’s.

Gu Mang was surprised as well. “Why is he here…?”

“I’m not sure, but you should put on the mask,” Mengze said, passing it to him.

At this point, most of the cultivators in the army felt certain that this mysterious attendant was the infamous Gu Mang. But regardless of how sure their guesses, openly revealing the fact would change the situation drastically. They still needed to maintain this bare pretense.

Murong Lian barged in, pipe in hand, just as Gu Mang lifted the mask to his face. His peach-blossom eyes swept over Gu Mang and landed on Mengze behind him, who was placing the last packet of medicinal powder into her chest. She turned to him with a smile. “Lian-ge, we’ll be striking camp and returning to court at first light. Shouldn’t you be resting instead of coming here to look for me?”

In lieu of answering, Murong Lian took two long drags of ephemera. His gaze swung back to Gu Mang. He exhaled dark smoke and pointed with

his pipe. “I’m not here for you. I’m here for him.”

A shift came over Mengze’s expression, but her tone remained gentle. “He’s but a minor attendant. If you have something to discuss, why don’t —”

“A minor attendant?” Murong Lian sneered. “Mengze, it’s one thing for you to help Mo Xi hide it from others. But why bother lying to me as well? Do you think I don’t know? When he handed the brocade pouch to me and asked for help, it was he himself who revealed his identity.”

Mengze fell silent.

“Gu Mang, come,” said Murong Lian.

“Lian-ge,” Mengze cut in, “he released the seal on his faewolf blood and was badly hurt. His mind hasn’t been stable; it’s quite possible he might lose control. You should go. If there’s anything to discuss, it can wait until we return to the capital.”

“What do you mean? Do you think I’m here to beat him up? Or do you think he’ll beat *me* up?” When Mengze didn’t answer, Murong Lian looked at her coldly. “Don’t worry, your ge won’t stoop so low as to fight a useless cur.” He waved an impatient hand at Gu Mang. “Come. I have something to talk to you about.”

Gu Mang thought for a moment, then rose to his feet.

“Your mind is unstable,” Mengze cautioned. “You shouldn’t—”

Murong Lian ignored her, taking Gu Mang’s hand without another word and dragging him out of the tent.

Cultivators were all busying over their own belongings, preparing for the next day’s travels. The main military tent was largely deserted. Murong Lian pulled Gu Mang behind him in silence. Only when they reached the secluded riverbank on the city outskirts did he finally let go of his hand.

Gu Mang rubbed at his reddened wrist. “Is something the matter?”

Murong Lian didn’t speak, pacing along the riverbank instead. Moonlight glimmered on the rippling water, shimmering over the reflection of Murong Lian’s bone-pale face set in a fretful expression. His lapels were slightly askew, with layers of bandages showing beneath. He too had

received heavy injuries in the final battle, and still looked wan despite the intervening days of rest and recovery.

Murong Lian's silk shoes creaked softly over the gravel of the riverbank. After pacing several circles, he came to a stop and stared at Gu Mang, taking a few deep puffs of ephemera. At last he said stiffly: "I have a question. There's something I want to confirm." He took another two pulls on his pipe, glaring at Gu Mang through peach-blossom eyes. "But before I say it—how many of your fucking memories have you recovered?"

Gu Mang answered honestly. "I used to have a lot. Now, I probably don't even have a fifth of them."

Murong Lian looked as if he was choking. His expression became even darker. "Then do you still remember Auntie Ni?"

Gu Mang started to shake his head, but before he got far with it, he was stopped by a sharp shout from Murong Lian. "The hell are you shaking your head for?! You still remembered her a few days ago when you begged me to take the pouch! Little brat—think carefully before you answer!"

"…I think I remembered her a few days ago, but now I don't."

Murong Lian swore quietly, deeply irked. "Back at Wangshu Manor, I told you to tell me the truth, but you *had* to play dumb and act stupid. Great, now you're actually stupid. Fucking hell! What *use* are you?" He let loose a stream of curses and kicked the rocks.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" Gu Mang asked helplessly. "You didn't just bring me out to swear at me, did you?"

"God dammit!" Murong Lian snapped. "Of course I had a good reason to see you. Do you think I'd be willing to look at your face otherwise?"

Gu Mang touched his mask, confirming that his face was completely concealed beneath it. Murong Lian really was just being obtuse on purpose.

"Then you can keep talking," Gu Mang said.

Murong Lian opened his mouth several times, but nothing came out. After a few such attempts, he turned away, muttering more curses. He stalked over to the river and took a few more harsh drags of ephemera before exhaling with the same vehemence.

His expression was gloomy through the lingering smoke. “There’s something you told me when your mind was still clear. I wanted to confirm it with you.”

Gu Mang blinked in silent confusion.

“Back then, I found your words absurd. I didn’t believe them—until some things happened recently.”

“Huh?” Gu Mang’s eyes widened slightly. “Something I told you?”

“Hmph.”

“Were you the only one I told?”

Murong Lian snorted.

“When did I say it?”

Murong Lian snorted again. “When you had just arrived back in Chonghua.”

Gu Mang looked blankly at Murong Lian’s reflection on the river’s surface. “Really? But my mind should have been muddled at that point. I still have some recollection of the Liao Kingdom destroying my memories before sending me to the capital.”

Murong Lian exhaled smoke. “If they really destroyed *all* your memories, would you have those recollections?”

Gu Mang thought it over. He did have a point.

“Listen up,” said Murong Lian. “What I’m about to say is what you personally told me when you first returned. At the time, I assumed you were motivated by some unknowable schemes or your deep grudge with Chonghua, so I didn’t believe it. But now…”

Murong Lian lowered his lashes, tapping the ash from the bowl of his pipe, which fluttered like snowflakes in the wind. He seemed to think a moment before coming to a decision; when he looked up again, his gaze fixed on Gu Mang’s face. “I think you may have spoken the truth. There are just some points I want confirmation on. Were you—”

A ferocious gust of wind rushed toward him along the riverbank. Murong Lian instinctively raised a hand and cast a protective barrier. With a crisp *click*, an arrow imbued with wood and water spiritual energy streaked

out from the dark forest and collided with the barrier in a blinding explosion.

Murong Lian's health had long been on the decline, and his recent injuries had yet to heal. His barrier shattered to powder on contact. He leapt up the craggy gravel riverbank, coughing out a mouthful of blood. Just this one move showed Murong Lian his assailant was far stronger than him. He had no time to put up more defenses; he turned and shouted, *"Run!"*

Gu Mang froze in alarm. The surrounding forest loomed around them, rustling with the sounds of assassins alighting on the tips of branches. "Hurry!" Murong Lian panted. "Why are you just standing there?!"

"But you—"

A voice, clearly distorted by a voice-changing spell, rang from the depths of the forest. "Wangshu-jun, no need to send him off in such a rush. No harm will come to him."

"Who the hell are you?" Murong Lian bit out.

"Heh, do you think I'd tell you?" A peal of laughter, like the shrill screech of an owl. "To think there's someone as naive and ridiculous as you at the emperor's side, and from the bloodline of the imperial family no less. Murong Lian, I've been truly enlightened today."

Murong Lian bit his bloodied lower lip. Without warning, he threw up another defensive screen. "I said run!" he snapped, flinging a hand at Gu Mang.

"Ridiculous!" the mysterious voice scoffed. With a *crash*, the screen fell to pieces. "With your weak body and Gu Mang's ruined one, what makes you think either of you can escape? But, Murong Lian, you can rest assured. I merely want to kill *you*. As for him—" That laughter pierced their ears like sharp thorns. "Let me ask: If I kill him, who will pay for the crime of your death? Don't worry—it won't be too painful or pathetic. On the contrary, your death will be very meaningful. Come!"

At his order, those swift assassins stepped into the moonlight. More than ten cultivators in close-fitting combat robes held bows with arrows nocked, surrounding them like a pack of wolves high in the fir trees. A man wearing a black cloak edged in gold leapt upward and stood gracefully at

the top of the highest tree, with the round, bright moon hanging behind him—their leader.

Gu Mang watched them from the riverbank. He wanted to reach out and summon Yongye, but his fragile body couldn't handle black magic techniques. The instant he tried, agony exploded through his head—his vision flickered, and his ears rang as he crumpled to his knees. In his daze, Gu Mang heard the leader in black give an ice-cold order:

"Execute Murong Lian. *Fire!*"

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Chapter 155:
Murong Lian's Memories (Part 1)

BLACK CROWS CAWED on the riverbank, wings flapping as they rose from the trees and scattered in all directions. The heavy stench of blood filled the air. Scarlet seeped from Murong Lian's wounds, soaking the broken gravel beneath.

The assassination had begun in an instant and ended just as quickly. The group moved with the swiftness of strict training. Gu Mang and Murong Lian stood close together, but the spells zeroed in on Murong Lian without putting a scratch on Gu Mang. The spiritual-energy arrows exploded a fraction before they sliced through flesh—though there were no arrowheads in Murong Lian's body, he was riddled with more than ten bloody holes.

Murong Lian swayed on his feet. As blood poured from his wounds and the pain grew into agony, he could no longer stand. He fell to his knees and vomited blood.

Seeing him like this, something seemed to burst in Gu Mang's head. "M-Murong…"

Murong Lian pressed a hand to the deepest wound in his chest, his breath shallow. His thin lips were rapidly losing color, bypassing pale and taking on a greenish tinge.

"My lord," one of the assassins in the tree branches warned in a muffled voice. "Someone's coming."

"Withdraw!"

Black shadows soared through the air, and the assassins melted into the forest just as they'd come. Murong Lian swore weakly. "Fucking… bitches… If you have the guts, then don't run…"

He curled into himself, coughing. Choking on another mouthful of blood, he wobbled and collapsed entirely onto the sharp stones of the riverbank. The bright moon shone high as fresh blood pooled on the ground.

In seconds, Gu Mang and the wounded Murong Lian were once again alone by the river.

Gu Mang had few good memories of Murong Lian, especially now—yet seeing him bloody and crumpled in front of him stabbed at some nerve deep in his mind. He stood frozen, his fingertips cold, before suddenly returning to his senses and rushing over to examine Murong Lian. His terror only grew. Even ignoring his other injuries, Murong Lian's chest had been left a mess of ravaged flesh by the spiritual-energy arrowheads, blood pouring out in a steady stream.

Gu Mang instinctively covered the wound with his hands, but it was no use. His palms were quickly sticky scarlet, but he couldn't stop Murong Lian from losing blood.

"Murong… Murong…"

Murong Lian was fading fast; his vision grew hazy. He lay on the gravel, chest heaving, blood oozing with each breath. Laboriously, he turned his light brown eyes on Gu Mang and said in a low voice, "Have you… Have you…really…"—he coughed—"forgotten…all…all those things, that…that have to do with me?"

Had Gu Mang witnessed this scene and heard this question a month ago when his recovered memories still lingered, he might have told Murong Lian the truth. Now it was too late. Gu Mang gazed into Murong Lian's upturned peach-blossom eyes. Such pretty eyes, but because of his high-set pupils, they were always sultry and challenging.

"At least…at least you should…" Murong Lian panted, reaching out with trembling fingers. But his wounds were too grave, leaving him with no strength whatsoever. His gaze locked unwaveringly on Gu Mang's face, eyes flashing with complicated feelings, full of dissatisfaction. He opened his mouth to continue, but what came out was blood and not sound.

From the forest came lanternlight and the sounds of people growing closer. Murong Lian's pale face suddenly flashed with lucidity. He raised a bloody hand and gathered a faint glow at his fingertips, tapping Gu Mang's chest before pushing him away.

"Run." Murong Lian was on the verge of unconsciousness. His eyes were losing focus, but he still slurred a hoarse warning: "Hurry up and

run… Otherwise…”

Murong Lian spat up another mouthful of blood. His voice was a bare whisper, his pretty peach-blossom eyes wide and flickering with the reflection of the starry sky and Gu Mang’s frightened face. The last words fluttered from his blood-stained lips like he spoke in a dream. “Otherwise… you’ll…never be able to explain this…”

“Murong Lian!”

“Gu Mang…” About to pass out, Murong Lian whispered, “To be honest… I… I’ve never…”

Blood bubbled up and stopped his words. Murong Lian’s hand twitched, as if to do one last thing, but he had no energy left. His hand fell to his side.

Everything had happened too quickly. Gu Mang’s head was ringing, incapable of mustering a response.

What did Murong Lian want to say?

At that moment, the patrolling cultivators of the Northern Frontier Army finally rushed out of the forest holding lanterns, the wavering light falling onto the figures of Gu Mang and Murong Lian. The squad leader was silent for a frozen moment before the lantern in his hand tumbled to the riverbank. “Wangshu-jun?!”

Coppery wind gusted past as the shrill cry of an alarm speared the skies and filled the dark night.

“Come quick! Wangshu-jun was attacked!”

“Grab the assassin!”

“Take him down!”

Gu Mang wasn’t planning to run, but what did those cultivators care? A bright spell-beam shot from the group and struck him viciously in the back. A loud shout: “Got him! He can’t run now!”

“Detain him!”

Gu Mang fell down dizzily next to Murong Lian. His face was turned to Murong Lian, gaze landing on that ever-cryptic face—

Murong Lian's cheeks were colorless, those mocking peach-blossom eyes tightly closed. What had Murong Lian wanted to tell him… What type of person was Murong Lian…?

He pondered these questions murkily, but without his memories, he had no idea of the answers. The last thing he was aware of before losing consciousness was being surrounded by a group of soldiers from the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion.

"Have you…really forgotten…all of those things that have to do with me?"

"At least…at least you should…"

You should what? Should remember what?

Murong Lian's final words echoed like a nightmare as Gu Mang drifted in a field of vast darkness. Suddenly, a beam of light emanated from his chest. Inside the dreamscape, he sat up, fingers finding the spot Murong Lian had tapped.

The glow there grew brighter and brighter, issuing unceasingly from his heart. Finally, it coalesced into a luminous white butterfly. Gu Mang felt an inexplicable summons; he rose from the ground, following those flapping wings into the darkness.

As he walked, the dreamscape deepened around him.

The spiritual butterfly guided him past Madam Zhao's misty, distorted face. "How do you plan to honor your father's legacy with how stupid and ignorant you are? How will you bring prestige to Wangshu Manor's line?"

He saw the housekeeper of Wangshu Manor reach out from the fog. "Shaozhu, it's dark out. You should hurry back to the qin room to cultivate, or you'll be punished by the madam again."

He even saw, in the depths of the thick haze, a youthful Mo Xi standing in the archery range with a bow in his hand, gold-trimmed black robes fluttering in the wind. Blurry faces of academy elders surrounded him, every one praising and commending him. Murong Lian watched

gloomily from a corner, clutching a music cultivation scroll he didn't want to read.

Countless voices surged like a tide—

First was Madam Zhao. "You'll never beat him."

Then came the academy elders. "You're always losing to him."

In the end, they all laughed nastily, warping into Murong Lian's own voice:

"Murong Lian, you'll never beat him."

"You're a pathetic clown, an underhanded villain… You can't even make your own decisions about what you like…"

"Murong Lian? No, you're just a copy of your dad… A puppet on strings…"

Gu Mang walked on; slowly, the voices faded while the glow of the white butterfly shone brighter. Motes of light streamed from its flapping wings and drifted downward, gradually dispelling the endless dark.

Light glimmered on the horizon. A wind blew toward him, and petals floated down little by little to join more butterflies spun from illusion magic.

He stepped forward into the pristine whiteness.

"Is it you…?" A child's voice called softly from the depths of that pure blankness. Before Gu Mang could answer, the butterflies dancing before him settled into an indistinct figure. The young Murong Lian stood in the light, turning to look at him. "It *is* you…"

In the same breath, a dazzling brilliance flashed past, so bright Gu Mang closed his eyes against it.

He heard the tinkling of wind chimes from the eaves.

A fawning voice was speaking: "Little Murong-gongzi, here's the box of sweets you asked for. Take a careful look. If there's anything you're unsatisfied with, this one will immediately have the pastry master remake them."

Gu Mang slowly opened his eyes. The form of the dreamscape had changed again. He stood before a red and gold building, its hall filled with

the white blooms of mountain camellias. Stocky women servants, forty to fifty years of age, attended the customers in the hall, all smiles in their coarse and colorful uniforms.

This was the House of Delicacies, the most famous pastry shop in the capital of Chonghua.

Murong Lian stood before the high firwood counter with his face upturned, small chin jutting as he spoke bossily to the shopkeeper. He was no more than four or five, still almost a toddler. From head to toe he was bedecked in accessories that screamed of wealth—any more and they'd be affixing gemstones to his fingernails—but he was too little. With all that gold and silver, jade and pearls, piled onto his small body, at first glance, onlookers didn't see a boy at all, but rather a little treasure chest on two stubby little legs.

Shopkeepers adored customers who practically had *I'm Rich* written across their foreheads. And Murong Lian was one of the noblest little young masters in Chonghua. Even if he was a tot still smelling of his mother's milk, this fifty-year-old shopkeeper would still gladly get on his knees to offer him all his respects.

Murong Lian took the box of sweets in his pudgy fingers and lifted the lid. Flaky pastries glistening yellow gazed back, pale-pink lotus crisps with their prominent layers, and the House of Delicacies's exclusive milk pudding: a gleaming translucent thing adorned with a peach blossom just beginning to bloom.

Murong Lian stared for a moment, then reached into the box and shoved the last sweet into his mouth without the slightest hesitation. "I'll take thith one," he said around his mouthful. "Go make another bockth."

Watching the child's look of complete seriousness coupled with drooling gluttony, the shopkeeper didn't dare laugh out loud. He nodded and bowed, sending back orders for the pastry chefs to make another set. Murong Lian sat in the House of Delicacies's seat of honor next to a pot of rose tea and gobbled up the contents of the entire box as he waited.

Why had Murong Lian left this specific illusionscape for him? Gu Mang saw the shopkeeper twitch the bamboo screen aside and approach Murong Lian with a fresh box of desserts. "Murong-gongzi, here's the new set. Would you like to check it again?"

Murong Lian was a precocious child. He imitated his mother exactly, waving his hand imperiously. “No need, I shall simply take it with me. You may put it on my monthly account.”

The shopkeeper hesitated. “Gongzi, you don’t have an account. Only Madam Zhao does… Why doesn’t this humble one put it on Madam Zhao’s account?”

“You can’t!” Murong Lian’s eyes widened as he shot the suggestion down. “Hold on, I have money.”

He began digging around inside his little cloth pouch, where Madam Zhao put Murong Lian’s allowance. But Madam Zhao was strict; she didn’t give him much, and most of it was loose change. The shopkeeper watched as Murong-gongzi, dripping with riches, dug out handfuls of pitiful white cowrie shells. He piled them together, counted them one by one, found it wasn’t enough, and started scooping out more.

But how much money could a four-year-old child have? After digging for several minutes, all he found was a few more scanty cowrie shell scraps.

Murong Lian looked up. He was clearly rather embarrassed, but he still put on his airs. “That’s all. No need for change.”

The shopkeeper blinked.

“Goodbye.”

With that, the little boy hoisted the box of sweets and pompously marched off in front of the speechless shopkeeper’s face, leaving the man on the verge of tears.

Upon arriving back at Wangshu Manor, Murong Lian summoned his closest attendant. First, he put on a show of drinking some tea. Only afterward did he flick his gaze upward and ask, “Ahem…that…that lowly little slave, the one whose forehead was cut when I pushed him yesterday. Is he still alive?”

Gu Mang was shocked. He had a vague recollection of this—so these memories were from the time Murong Lian had shoved him off the swing. He’d cut his head, and Auntie Lin had taken him for treatment.

The attendant had no idea why Murong Lian was asking. “Shaozhu,” he started fearfully, “h-he’s still alive.”

Murong Lian murmured a cryptic, “Oh,” his expression unreadable. “Still alive.”

“Y-yes, Auntie Lin took him to the healer. That brat is probably still resting in Auntie Lin’s house. Does Shaozhu have any instructions?”

“…No,” Murong Lian replied. “You may go.”

The attendant left. Murong Lian sat at the table with his legs crossed and thought for a while. In the end, he picked out an old coin from his treasure box. Holding it in his palm, he mumbled, “Heads, I’ll go say sorry. Tails, I’ll eat the whole box myself.”

He tossed it. The coin whirled in circles on the table before wobbling to a stop—heads.

“Fine,” Murong Lian grumbled. “I’m the one who pushed you anyway. I’ll just say *sorry*, it’s not like I’ll die.”

He hopped down from his chair, tiptoed over to pick up the House of Delicacies’s pastry box from the table, and set off for Auntie Lin’s home.

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Chapter 156:
Murong Lian's Memories (Part 2)

GU MANG FOLLOWED in Murong Lian's footsteps, wholly confused. His memories of Murong Lian were scant, but he knew Murong Lian had never treated him with kindness. Gu Mang couldn't imagine him bringing a box of sweets to say sorry.

Little children were simple: push them today and they'd hold a grudge against you, but offer them a stick of tanghulu tomorrow and their grudge would disappear. Gu Mang was certain he had never received that box of pastries from Murong Lian; if he had, his relationship with Murong Lian would never have become so miserable.

Beset by doubts, he trailed after Murong Lian.

Finally, they reached Auntie Lin's little house.

The peach tree beside the door was in full and splendid bloom. Murong Lian stood beneath it, fussing with his clothes and clearing his throat several times. Only after ensuring he looked the part of the Murong heir did he reach up to knock on the door.

But before his knuckles touched the wood, he heard the sound of two women talking inside.

"How did this happen?" The first voice was imposing in tone and sharp with censure; it was unmistakably Madam Zhao, Murong Lian's mother. "I asked you to take care of him and *this* is how he ends up?"

Murong Lian's face twisted with shock. His little fist lowered.

Auntie Lin's timid voice sounded next. "I'm sorry, I was careless."

"I don't think you're careless; I think you're brainless. Auntie Lin, in the years you've been at Wangshu Manor, have I, Zhao Susu, ever disgraced you? This child's injuries are severe—why didn't you come find me at once? Did you think I wouldn't help you?"

Auntie Lin replied hastily, "No, no. It's not that…"

Madam Zhao snorted. “Why bother explaining? I know you’ve always hated me. All of Chonghua thinks me a jealous shrew. Why should you be the exception?”

“Madam…”

“Enough,” snapped Madam Zhao. “Give me the child. Do your work properly and don’t let me see you idling around.”

For a moment, there was no sound but rustling footsteps from within the room. Then Madam Zhao’s raised voice pierced the wooden door. “*Now* what are you doing?”

“Madam, please,” begged Auntie Lin. “Allow me to keep him here. A-Mang is a spirited child, but he’s actually very shy of strangers. He won’t sleep well if he’s with you…”

“Am I a stranger?!”

“No…”

“Then why would he be afraid of me? Will I eat him or poison him?”

“That’s not what I meant—”

“Then let go! What are you so worried about? Even if I don’t like him, do you think I’d harm him?”

Auntie Lin didn’t respond, but Madam Zhao continued. “Auntie Lin, you’d better get your head on straight. I am the head of Wangshu Manor, and if nothing else, the boy is a son of the Wangshu line!”

There was dead silence on both sides of the door.

A buzz rang through Gu Mang’s head like a muffled explosion. He didn’t dare believe his own ears. What? Who was a son of the Wangshu line? What did… What did Madam Zhao mean… What was she saying?!

Amid the deafening rush of blood, the door of the little house creaked open. It wasn’t only Gu Mang in the dreamscape who was stupefied; there was also Murong Lian within the memory. The child looked as if he would turn tail and run, but his feet remained rooted to the spot. Standing dumbly in the doorway, he couldn’t move a muscle. He and Madam Zhao came face-to-face.

“M-Mom…” he stuttered.

Madam Zhao had come out with Gu Mang asleep in her arms. When she spotted Murong Lian, her face went bloodless. “What are you doing here?!”

Murong Lian tilted his pale little face upward, stammering at his own mother in fear. “I…I…”

But Madam Zhao didn’t let him answer. She seemed to have realized something, raising her hand to cut the child off before closing the door and blocking Auntie Lin’s line of sight.

“Madam…” Auntie Lin ventured.

“Stay in there!”

“Madam… A-Mang’s a scaredy-cat… He’s really so scared of being a bother…” Auntie Lin knew she’d irritated Madam Zhao, yet she persisted, timid yet stubborn. “After…after you have his wound looked at, please let him come back… I’ll definitely…”

“Shut up!” Madam Zhao kicked the door shut with a *thud*.

It seemed Madam Zhao didn’t want to let Auntie Lin see Murong Lian standing outside. She frowned, voice low through her clenched jaw. “Come here.”

Murong Lian stood blankly, locked in place.

“I said come here *now*!”

He stared up at his own mother in terror, petrified.

Madam Zhao swore softly and grabbed his collar. Supporting Gu Mang with her left hand and dragging Murong Lian with her right, she marched off without a single backward glance.

Upon returning to her own room, Madam Zhao dismissed the servants and tossed Gu Mang on the bed before turning to Murong Lian. “How much did you hear?”

Murong Lian was so little back then—he’d never in his life experienced anything like this. He couldn’t say a thing, eyes wide with frightened tears.

“I’m asking you a question. You’re going to be a man, yet you cry every other word?! What kind of behavior is this?”

“I-I…” Murong Lian was still holding that box of pastries. Under such intense pressure from his mother, he burst into tears with a wail. “Mom, am I not your real son?! Was I picked up from somewhere else?”

Madam Zhao stared.

Once Murong Lian started crying, he couldn’t stop. He glanced first at Madam Zhao, then at Gu Mang unconscious on the bed, then sobbed himself breathless.

It took Madam Zhao a moment to follow his train of thought. She brought a hand to her brow before slamming it on the table. “Murong Lian! What nonsense is in your head? Could someone as divinely beautiful as I give birth to such an ugly, stinking brat?”

Murong Lian’s narcissism was the mirror image of his mother’s; one could be sure Murong Lian was Madam Zhao’s flesh and blood based on this characteristic alone. The boy wiped his tears with a tiny hand, stammering through sobs, “But you just said…you said he’s…he’s…” Madam Zhao narrowed her eyes. Murong Lian’s voice faltered; he finished the sentence in a whisper: “He’s part of our family…”

This time, Madam Zhao didn’t have a ready answer. She crossed to Murong Lian and took the box he was gripping so tightly, placing it on a table covered in satin cloth shot through with gold and embroidered with white birds. She poured herself a cup of floral and fruit tea and drank it slowly.

Fingers with scarlet-dyed nails carefully turned the Ru ware cup. When Madam Zhao at last looked up, it was not at Murong Lian. Her gaze fixed upon Gu Mang. Only after a long while did she say, “Murong Lian, come here.”

Hesitant, Murong Lian padded over to her.

Madam Zhao set down the teacup and considered him before finally taking him by the shoulder. “You would have found out sooner or later. I wanted to tell you when you were a little older, but since you’ve overheard, there’s no point keeping it from you. But you must keep this secret buried in your heart. Speak of it to no one. Do you understand?”

Murong Lian nodded mutely. But how could such a young child be trusted to keep a secret? This thought had occurred to Madam Zhao as well.

She grabbed Murong Lian’s hand. Light coalesced at her fingertips as she traced a sigil on his palm.

It was obviously not a pleasant sort of array; Murong Lian immediately shouted, “Mom, it hurts!”

“It’s just the pain of the sigil forming,” Madam Zhao said. “With this sigil, you won’t be able to speak of any of the secrets you heard today before you become the master of Wangshu Manor. One word out of line, and a pain much worse than *this* will ensure you keep your mouth shut.”

She released his palm.

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“Don’t think me cruel. You were born a Murong; exposing the slightest weakness, making the slightest mistake, could cost you your life.”

Finally Madam Zhao let Murong Lian sit. Expression complicated, she glanced at the boy, who was clutching the back of his hand with tear-sodden lashes. She took a moment before she started speaking, very deliberately, trying her best to explain those bygone events in a way the little boy could understand. “Your father… Our relationship…” After hesitating, she continued stiffly, “Was actually…never as good as you thought.”

Murong Lian said nothing.

Gu Mang had heard of this from Mo Xi. The old Wangshu-jun didn’t love Madam Zhao; his heart had been set on a maiden from Lin’an. But because of the constraints of rank and hierarchy, Murong Xuan had been barred from taking that maiden as his wife, instead wedding Lady Zhao, a more suitable match for his status.

But how could onlookers see all sides of such a story? Only those involved could give an accurate account. As Madam Zhao spoke, the truth of those past events floated to the surface.

Madam Zhao was of noble birth, but she wasn’t born in the capital. Her father was an important official stationed at the eastern frontier, and his entire family lived within their fiefdom. It was only once a year, at the New Year’s Eve feast, that Marquis Zhao brought his wife and daughter to the imperial city.

When Zhao Susu, then a girl in the bloom of her youth, saw Murong Xuan playing the qin for the emperor at one of these feasts, she fell in love with this young and promising noble.

This girl, however, was prickly and proud. When anyone noticed her feelings, she became embarrassed and vehemently denied them, making a show of turning up her nose at Murong Xuan. The young man was left with a rather poor impression of her, to say nothing of any interest in pursuing her hand in marriage.

Zhao Susu, on the contrary, had quite the high opinion of herself. She never doubted that even if she rolled her eyes every time they met, Murong Xuan would be overcome by her beauty and fall at her feet.

Of course, the results were abysmal. Murong Xuan didn't fall for her. Instead, when he was out hunting, he met a maiden fleeing from Lin'an. For some reason—possibly because she'd fallen and hit her head—she remembered very little about herself, and only knew that her last name was Chu. No matter how she was questioned, she couldn't recall anything more.

Aside from that, however, she was nothing but goodness, possessed of a delicate beauty and gentle temperament. Little by little, Murong Xuan fell in love.

In hindsight, such a love was doomed from the start. Miss Chu's background was unknown, and she was lowborn… Nothing about her marked her as a good match for Murong Xuan. But back then, Murong Xuan had been young and idealistic. He impetuously went to the emperor—his older brother—to make his feelings known and begged him to confer a marriage with Miss Chu.

It wasn't impossible in principle. But the emperor happened to have recently agreed to Marquis Zhao's betrothal request and promised to marry his daughter Zhao Susu to Murong Xuan. The marriages of pure-blooded nobles were largely decided by the emperor, who'd had no idea Murong Xuan had fallen in love with another young woman. An emperor, however, could not go back on his word. For the sake of his imperial dignity, he categorically refused Murong Xuan's request and ordered him to cut ties with Miss Chu.

But Murong Xuan's heart was set on Miss Chu; how could he be willing to do so? The late Wangshu, who had ever been gentle and refined in temperament, argued with his brother in the hall. The emperor grew irritated, but he didn't want to make things difficult for his younger brother. He suppressed his rage and offered a compromise. If Murong Xuan really couldn't let Miss Chu go, His Imperial Majesty was willing to make an exception and raise Miss Chu's rank, allowing Murong Xuan to take her as a concubine—after he married Zhao Susu and had a son or two.

The emperor had thought he was making a generous concession. But to his surprise, his sensible younger brother stubbornly refused to bend. At this, he lost his temper.

The feudal lord of Lin'an, Yue Juntian, had stepped forward amid the emperor's tirade and presented a report. He claimed he'd gone to

investigate Miss Chu's background, only to find there was never a maiden surnamed Chu in Lin'an. This woman of unknown origins was either a spy or a devil.

In his fury, the emperor sent Miss Chu to Sishu Terrace on charges of bewitchment, condemning her as a subject for experimentation. Murong Xuan had no choice but to agree to the betrothal, and married Lady Zhao in exchange for Miss Chu's life.

In truth, the emperor had never believed Miss Chu was a spy. It was obvious Yue Juntian had taken the opportunity to slander her in service of his own grudges; he merely planned to threaten Murong Xuan and have that be the end of it. As long as Murong Xuan accepted the betrothal and satisfied his important subject Zhao and his clan's requests, the emperor was happy to let Miss Chu walk free.

Marquis Zhao and his family saw it rather differently. Zhao Susu was herself so narcissistic that she entirely ignored the rumors and never suspected there was anything between her new husband and Miss Chu. Everyone else in the Zhao Clan, however, felt this Miss Chu was a thorn in their side they must pull out at all costs. With Yue Juntian fanning the flames from the sidelines, the Zhao Clan grew more and more restless.

Unbeknownst to the emperor, a few members of the Zhao Clan came up with a scheme. They paid off several Sishu Terrace cultivators to release a fake Miss Chu, leaving the real Miss Chu as a test subject, hovering on the verge of death.

They fancied themselves removing an obstacle to their daughter's marital bliss—but there was no such thing as a foolproof plan. News of their deception swiftly reached Murong Xuan where he was fighting on the front lines. The late Wangshu was already in the grips of a deep depression; upon hearing the news, he was so shaken that he incurred heavy injuries from enemy troops in battle. He passed away before he ever made it back to the city, breathing his last on the banks of the Fushui River.

The Zhao Clan hadn't expected their plot would backfire, failing to help their daughter and instead turning the young Madam Zhao into a widow. When word of her husband's death arrived, Madam Zhao was seven months pregnant. Grief sent her into early labor, and amid her pain, she gave birth to a little boy—Murong Lian.

Madam Zhao sank into despair, wallowing in the anguish of losing her husband. She had no idea Murong Xuan had been tricked into drinking aphrodisiac wine on their wedding night and had no feelings for her at all. She'd thought they were mutually in love, only to be henceforth separated by the gulf of life and death.

Or so she believed until one fateful day, when her condition had improved, she went alone to her deceased husband's study to shed some tears and tidy his things. There she found a stack of letters her husband had written to Miss Chu.

It was upon witnessing the gentle care that flowed from those written words that Madam Zhao finally realized her convictions about her husband's affections had been nothing but her own outrageous arrogance. All of those rumors were true. The woman her husband had loved was not her but that common refugee.

Madam Zhao was prideful—how could she not fly into a humiliated rage? She confronted the lying elders of her family, who had only thought of marrying her into the Murong Clan. She slammed doors and flipped tables, yet it wasn't enough to vent her fury. When she thought of Miss Chu, she grew still more incensed. She'd become a laughingstock, all because of the Zhao Clan, who had treated her like a chess piece, and because of that bitch named Chu. She'd already upbraided the Zhao Clan; how could Miss Chu not pay as well?

After asking around, she finally found that Miss Chu was being held in the Asura Room of Sishu Terrace. Furious and hateful, she went to wreak her revenge.

She had heard Miss Chu was being used for medicinal experiments by the cultivators her family paid off. But the "seductive bitch" she saw at Sishu Terrace was merely a body kept frozen by spells, with a completely disfigured face, emaciated limbs, and…a visibly swollen belly.

"It's been a few months, but she's been frozen in infernal ice all along. A year within the ice is no more than two or three days outside," one of the cultivators explained. "Your esteemed father wanted her disposed of immediately, but that would have been too obvious. We didn't want to risk His Imperial Majesty's suspicion, so we kept her frozen. Madam, would you like to kill her now?"

Madam Zhao stared, dazed.

When she'd first seen the love letters her husband wrote to this woman, she'd felt only a consuming jealousy and hatred. But as she looked through the dark ice, she saw a woman about the same age as herself.

Because of her humble birth, she hadn't been able to marry the man she loved. On top of that, her face had been ruined, her life hung by a thread, and she couldn't even protect her own child. The responsibility for all of this rested with the Zhao Clan.

Madam Zhao and Miss Chu were the same. Both were pawns on the chessboard, expendable goods.

She didn't know how to feel. She stared again at the belly that held a life growing within it. Madam Zhao was no saint, but she was also a new mother. Her heart was softer than it might have been. After hesitating at length, she realized she couldn't bear to see this continue, and rescued Miss Chu. Unknown to all, Zhao Susu hid her deep in the Wangshu residence and brought in a discreet midwife to care for her until the child was safely born.

To conceal her identity, she changed Miss Chu's surname, keeping only the top half of the character *Chu* to give her the name *Lin*.[6]

Miss Chu disappeared from the world, while a disfigured matron appeared in Wangshu Manor—Gu Mang's Auntie Ni.

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Chapter 157:
The Hero’s Ribbon He Could Never Wear

GU MANG CLUTCHED at his head, vision going dark.

Kept it a secret from everyone…

Changed her last name to Lin…

Miss Chu from Lin’an…

These scattered scraps of information stabbed into his skull like so many sharp knives, ravaging his already disordered mind and triggering a cascade of new memories.

He heard a voice soft as satin singing: “Red haitang, yellow haitang, floating gently in the wind. Children in a land far away, missing their mom and dad.”

The singer had a faint Lin’an accent as she sang a nursery rhyme from the canals of Jiangnan, coaxing the child to sleep. *Red haitang, yellow haitang…*

Gu Mang took a shaking step backward, his temples spasming in agony. On one side were his disappearing memories, on the other the recollections swarming back; in his head, the shattered events of the past raged around him like a snowstorm. A vision appeared, further rattling his mind.

He saw a little room in Wangshu Manor. Auntie Lin sat by the window with a blanket draped over her shoulders. She patted Gu Mang, sleeping in her lap, as she crooned, “Floating gently in the wind. Children in a land far away…”

In that memory, Gu Mang’s eyes fluttered open a crack. He smiled up at Auntie Lin and mumbled, half-asleep, “Auntie Ni, you sing so pretty.”

Auntie Lin’s gaze was as gentle as spring willows. She patted the child’s hair. “If A-Mang likes it, Auntie Lin will sing for you always.”

“Won’t you get tired?”

The woman smiled. “I won’t.”

“Won’t you get thirsty?”

“I won’t.”

The little boy was muzzy with drowsiness. He yawned, curling up by the woman’s side like a little cub. “Auntie Ni, wouldn’t it be nice if you were my mom.”

The hands caressing him stilled, trembling slightly. But the boy Gu Mang in the memory didn’t notice such a detail. He certainly didn’t look up and see Auntie Lin’s pained expression. He just curled a little tighter, nestling more snugly into her side.

Through the open window, scraps of petals drifted silkily down with the spring rain, fluttering into the room. That fall of pale pink seemed like a beautiful dream from which they’d wake at any moment.

“Children in a land far away, missing their mom and dad…”

Gu Mang fell to his knees in the dreamscape; his skull felt like it was being hacked open by a blunt cleaver. He clutched at his head, panting on the ground like a dying fish, spasming uncontrollably.

Murong Lian said—*you should at least remember—*

Remember what? Remember that Auntie Lin’s last name wasn’t Lin but Chu; that he wasn’t a random slave of Wangshu Manor but the child of Murong Xuan and Miss Chu…right?

He found himself thinking of those important things he’d written in his book, and one phrase he’d written over and over again to remind himself: *You owe your life to Wangshu Manor. The past is hard to explain, a web difficult to unravel. You must remember this: do nothing to harm Wangshu-jun.*

Before he lost his memories, he had known the truth, hadn’t he?

As if roused by the intense turbulence of his mind, memories that had sunk into the abyss leapt back ashore like a dragon arcing out of water. Listening to that nursery rhyme of fluttering haitang petals, he hazily remembered what Auntie Lin told him before her death.

The sickly woman had gripped his hand tightly, her chapped lips parting. “A-Mang… Even though…even though Madam Zhao…has her shortcomings…she… She’s not like the entire capital of Chonghua says. She’s…” She coughed. “She’s not a vicious and jealous woman… She’s not…like her family. Her heart is kind. It’s just that she’s obstinate; she doesn’t care to…correct other people’s misunderstandings… But you mustn’t misunderstand her. If it weren’t for her…A-Mang, you wouldn’t have been born. Did you know…? She…she saved your life, and my life too.” A faint smile spread over Auntie Lin’s emaciated face. “So, please don’t resent that mother and son, Madam Zhao and the little gongzi. In truth…”

At this point, her breathing grew labored. Her pale lips quivered, eyes fixed on Gu Mang’s face as if trying to carve it into her soul. Her voice was as soft as a mosquito’s buzz, filled with tears as she persisted. “In truth… their… Their lives are pitiful too…”

They, too, had no way of achieving their wishes, nowhere to retreat. This mother and son both were bound by blood and pride. In truth, their lives were far from easy.

“Auntie Ni! Auntie Ni!” Little Gu Mang crouched beside the woman’s bed. Her eyes were still open, clear tears streaming down her cheeks, but the light in her pupils had gone. Back then Gu Mang didn’t quite understand matters of life and death, but he hazily understood this woman who sang lullabies to him would never come back. He began to bawl.

He was so heartbroken, devastated by the first eternal farewell in his life, that he didn’t process what Auntie Lin had told him then at all. Only much later did he dimly realize that, to say these things, Auntie Lin must have known something about his identity. At the very least she must have known who his birth mother was, though she never gave him the chance to ask about it.

Later still, Gu Mang grew up. Murong Lian bullied and humiliated him, but he rarely held grudges or fought back. Perhaps it was because Auntie Lin had never asked anything of him; her sole request before her death was for him not to make things difficult for Madam Zhao or her son. Or perhaps it was because Auntie Lin had never lied to him—if she said

Madam Zhao saved him, then she couldn’t be wrong. Gu Mang treated them with gratitude.

At the same time, he continued to investigate the circumstances of his birth. From the forbidden pamphlets sold in street stalls and from word-of-mouth gossip, he gradually formed some uncertain guesses.

And so the years passed until one day, as he was tidying the abandoned and dusty library in Wangshu Manor, he discovered that box of letters Murong Xuan had exchanged with Miss Chu. Everything finally came to light. He realized he was most likely Murong Xuan’s own child—Murong Lian’s half-brother. By then, both Auntie Lin and Madam Zhao had long become bones in their graves.

Gu Mang had no concrete proof of his lineage, and in all honesty, he’d already attained a life he wanted. He had lived too long in the dark; he’d made friends with Lu Zhanxing, made friends with his own gang of rascals who had come from the dirt. He didn’t want to shed his skin and crawl bloodily ashore to stand among the nobles with whom he apparently belonged. He had been a slave all his life; he deeply understood their suffering. He would rather brave the headwinds with his fellows and bring them out of the cold than seek benefit for himself alone.

Only once did he betray any yearning for his true identity. One winter before the New Year’s Eve feast, as he faced a set of ceremonial robes belonging to Murong Xuan, he couldn’t stop his eyes from reddening. He reached out with gentle fingers to touch that blue and gold merit ribbon. Unobserved within the room, he tied it neatly over his own brow.

This ribbon was his birthright, but, like a thief, he could only sneakily try it on this once.

Before he could take a closer look in the mirror, the door behind him slammed open. Furious, Murong Lian charged in, his eyes flashing with hate. “You filthy slave! You dare touch my dad’s things? Take it off!”

Take it off!

Murong Lian’s voice was sharp and urgent; he reached out to snatch away Gu Mang’s merit ribbon. “This belongs to the Murong Clan. Who the hell do you think you are! As if you’re worthy—”

Gu Mang had been too mired in sorrow back then to see that Murong Lian was rather *too* frantic when he stormed in to seize the ribbon. He assumed Murong Lian humiliated him purely because he despised him.

But it wasn't so. Just as Gu Mang knew the truth and never revealed it, Murong Lian had also known for many years. It was for precisely this reason that Gu Mang's every achievement was like a stinging slap across his face, Gu Mang's every success a threat to his position.

"You're both successors to the bloodline. If you don't try harder, sooner or later Wangshu Manor will be his."

"How could you lose to a common-born brat?"

"Murong Lian, you need to treat him like a sword pressed to your neck. Think about it—if there comes a day when he learns he's part of the Murong Clan, there's no way he won't take your position."

The two of them had both known of their brotherhood. But one had regarded the other with constant wariness and made malicious conjectures, while the other had abided by his mother's last words, silently enduring, yielding, and protecting.

Until today.

Gu Mang woke up gasping from the illusion. His eyes opened to pitch darkness. He didn't know where he was, how long he'd been unconscious, or what time it was now. He didn't care. Lips trembling, he covered his eyes with shaking hands.

Surrounded by silence, mind in tumult, Gu Mang scrubbed at his face, feeling his fingers come away damp. He shivered. It was as though the blood Murong Lian had lost was still on his palms.

Court was dismissed.

The emperor stood with an arm behind his back on the terrace of the throne room. It was misty out, dark clouds rolling across the sky as they pressed in toward the empire's capital. Dragonflies skimmed low among the delicate lotuses of the flower pool, the air filled with the scent of the incoming storm.

“Your Imperial Majesty, we’ve begun experimentation on the remnant of the Demonblood Beast’s soul. Everything is going smoothly.” Zhou He stood nearby, reporting to the emperor. “But the Liao Kingdom is making preparations. I doubt they’ll give us much time. It’s just as you said today in court—they could launch a large-scale attack at any moment. I may not be able to develop what you need before war breaks out in earnest.”

The emperor closed his eyes. “All we can do is plan; success depends on the heavens. This wisp of soul did not come easily—that it’s in our hands at all is an act of divine assistance. We believe in the fortune of Chonghua; have faith. It is enough that you do your best.”

Zhou He nodded but made no move to leave.

The emperor turned to him. “Is there more?”

“Yes,” Zhou He replied. “That remnant of the Demonblood Beast’s soul is weak, incapable of fully harnessing its own spiritual energy. This subordinate heard the guoshi of the Liao Kingdom used a demonic qin to amass qi for it, but Sishu Terrace has no such tool. I’m afraid I’m unable to think of an appropriate solution, so if I may be so bold, I’d like to request help from Your Imperial Majesty.”

“Do I understand correctly—you want a magical tool that can accumulate spiritual energy for the Demonblood Beast?”

Zhou He nodded.

The emperor frowned. “This is a difficult request. Normally, we’d turn to the Yue Clan, but old Yue Juntian’s health has been poor of late. He recently took everyone from Yue Manor to the old fiefdom of Lin’an to recuperate at Huntian Cave. They won’t return anytime soon.”

“Then what about Qingxu Elder?” Zhou He asked.

“He’s not in the capital either. He said he’s still related to the Yue Clan by blood—even if you break a bone, the tendon remains. Yue Juntian refuses to acknowledge him, but the old man is reaching his final years. Qingxu isn’t a petty man. He went with him,” the emperor said. “The three grandmaster artificers of Chonghua—Yue Juntian, Jiang Yexue, and Murong Chuyi—are all in the fiefdom of Lin’an. But the matter of the Demonblood Beast is most urgent,” the emperor continued. “We’ll send to

Yue Juntian today and request he think of methods to develop such a tool while he recovers in Lin’an. You needn’t worry.”

“Understood.”

The emperor had more warnings to give Zhou He, but before he could continue, an attendant came forward and spoke quietly: “Your Imperial Majesty, Xihe-jun is waiting outside. He requests an audience.”

The emperor turned to Zhou He. “You are dismissed.” To the official he said, “Show him in.”

Zhou He met Mo Xi in the corridor on his way out.

It had been three days since the Northern Frontier Army returned victorious from Da’ze. Rumors of the strange events at the front lines had already caused quite a stir. Even Zhou He, who ignored everything around him, had heard the tale of the Liao Kingdom guoshi using Gu Mang as leverage to coerce Mo Xi, to say nothing of those theories too scandalous to bear repeating.

The entire city was abuzz with the news; even if no one dared to interrogate Mo Xi explicitly, almost every household, family, and person secretly discussed him and Gu Mang in their idle moments. Many details that had previously escaped public scrutiny—such as Murong Lian’s claim that Mo Xi had gone to Luomei Pavilion to see Gu Mang, or the fact that Mo Xi had fought with Murong Lian before the court over his custody—became profoundly suggestive under intense dissection.

Zhou He had seen Mo Xi take the prisoner with his own eyes; he naturally had more guesses than others. The second he saw Mo Xi beneath the veranda, his mouth pulled into a dark sneer. “Xihe-jun, are you here to beg leniency for that oh-so-close brother of yours again? You’ll find it a bit more difficult this time. He’s the number one suspect in Wangshu-jun’s assassination.”

Mo Xi didn’t dignify this with a response. His handsome face was icy as he passed by without so much as a blink, striding toward the terrace outside the throne room.

When he arrived, the emperor was sitting by the lacquered railing, having plucked a blade of foxtail grass to tease the red dragonflies hovering above the pool.

“Your Imperial Majesty.”

“Mn. You’ve come.”

Mo Xi wasted no words. “How is Wangshu-jun?”

“Mengze is treating him, but his prognosis is poor. It’s been days, yet he shows no sign of waking.”

Mo Xi said nothing.

“But you needn’t worry. We know the truth. We would never believe General Gu was the one who tried to assassinate Wangshu-jun. It’s merely that, with him currently in the eye of the storm, we must keep up appearances.” The emperor paused. “The cell we sent him to is a prison in name, but as we’ve shown you, it’s a quiet chamber suitable for rest and recovery. If you want to see him, you needn’t inform us; you may go as you please.”

“I came precisely because of this matter.”

The emperor frowned. “What about it?”

Mo Xi had considered his words before coming. He’d thought of telling the emperor that no matter how well the imperial household protected Gu Mang, he could not be at ease; he’d thought of confessing he’d endured too many separations with Gu Mang in the first half of his life and was unwilling for Gu Mang to leave his sight. He’d even thought of directly revealing his relationship with Gu Mang to the emperor.

But when the time came, he found that anything he could say would be useless. He had a vague feeling that the emperor already knew it all, and that nothing more needed to be said. And so Mo Xi merely replied, “I still plan to have him secretly brought back to Xihe Manor.”

The emperor was silent a moment. He sighed. “Xihe-jun, taking him into custody for interrogation is only a pretense for outsiders. You know we have treated him with care since you both returned from Da’ze. The black magic energy in his body is out of control, and his mind is in such chaos it’s on the verge of collapse. We’ve done all we can to get him treatment.”

“I know,” Mo Xi said. “I’ve been caught up with work at the Bureau of Military Affairs the past few days and have hardly been home. I couldn’t

take proper care of him and have relied entirely on Your Imperial Majesty to tend to Gu-shixiong."

"So long as you understand…"

"But now I have finished with my duties. I want to be by his side."

The emperor let the foxtail grass fall, startling the circling dragonflies into scattering. "Do you not trust us?"

"It's just that I promised never to leave him again."

The emperor heaved another sigh. "Xihe-jun, the eyes of all of Chonghua are on the two of you… We don't know how much of those rumors—" He fell silent. After a pause, he said, "It's safer to keep him here with us."

But Mo Xi had no intention to negotiate. He looked at the emperor silently and resolutely.

After a long moment, the emperor relented, slightly exasperated. "All right. If you insist, you may retrieve him from our treatment room, but you must be careful. Don't let anyone notice he's in your manor."

Mo Xi cupped his fist in obeisance. "Many thanks to Your Imperial Majesty."

He had just turned, ready to fetch Gu Mang, when he spied a secret guard of the palace rushing toward them over the rooftops. The guard leapt down from the eaves and staggered on the terrace, bleeding from several serious wounds. "Y-Your Imperial Majesty!"

The emperor was astonished. "What's happened?"

"Bad news! A powerful enemy broke into Gu Mang's t-treatment room!"

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Chapter 158:
The Final Straw

INSIDE THE TREATMENT ROOM, a slender man in close-fitting black robes stood beside Gu Mang's bed.

One hand held a scimitar, its snow-bright blade stained with blood and dripping red onto the floor. Gu Mang sat on the bed, gazing through the translucent gauze canopy as the man drew closer.

Maybe those memories had shocked him too deeply; few emotions showed on Gu Mang's wan face. There was only an icy numbness as he stared at this unexpected guest.

Gu Mang was first to break the silence. "Why did you want to kill Murong Lian?"

The black-clad man stilled. "How did you know it was me?"

Gu Mang gazed at him. "The Liao Kingdom fused me with a wolf. I have the senses of one."

"So that's how it is…"

"Why did you want to kill him?" Gu Mang said through gritted teeth.

He held little hope that this person would respond, but to his surprise, the black-clad man slowly came to a stop. A low, muffled voice issued from the black cloth covering his face. "You've got it wrong. I was the one who attacked Murong Lian, but it wasn't me who wanted to kill him. I'm merely following orders. But," he continued, "I can tell you why that person wants him dead—Murong Lian knows too many secrets. If it were me, I wouldn't let him live either."

"Then what about me?" Gu Mang asked. "Why take such pains to kill me?"

"Wrong again. I haven't come to kill you at all."

Gu Mang stared at the blade dripping blood. "Very convincing."

That black-clad man caressed the scimitar, chuckling. “If I could, I *would* take your life. Dealing with you outright would be cleanest by far. Unfortunately doing so is more difficult than I’d like.”

“Sir, you’ve trespassed into a room in the depths of the palace as if it were an abandoned building. How would it be difficult to take this humble Gu’s head?”

That black-clad man smiled. “As expected, Murong Lian knew too much, and you know too little.” He didn’t elaborate further. The imperial palace was filled with formidable experts; if he tarried too long and reinforcements arrived, he would find escape challenging no matter how extraordinary his skills. “No, I’ve come to tell you a secret.”

Gu Mang narrowed his eyes slightly. He’d more or less guessed this person’s intent. Judging by what Liao’s guoshi had said, Gu Mang’s current body was like a vessel spiderwebbed with cracks. Any substantial shock and he would shatter totally, reduced to a walking corpse consumed by black magic. Perhaps this visitor didn’t plan to kill him with the blade, but he was likely hoping to strike his mind and destroy what sanity Gu Mang retained.

Sitting up straight, Gu Mang pinned blue eyes on his opponent. This man wouldn’t succeed easily. The onslaught of rumors, Murong Lian’s grave injury, Auntie Lin’s identity, the truth about his family…all those blows had already landed. Though his memories were a mess, fractured and broken, he still maintained his sense of self. If he were devoured by black magic, there would be no return; Gu Mang refused to fall into the abyss.

What devastating secret could his opponent possibly use to break him? In an instant, countless guesses flashed through his mind. He donned them like armor. No matter what this man said, he thought, he wouldn’t be shocked.

But the black-clad man spoke four words Gu Mang hadn’t expected at all: “The Vow of Calamity.”

Bestial instinct set his head ringing before his mind could catch up; Gu Mang’s blood ran cold against his will. Eyes the clear blue of lakes widened slightly. He could feel the defenses he’d built shudder, about to be destroyed by these words. He shouldn’t listen—he knew instinctively he

shouldn’t listen—but like a moth drawn to that fatal flame, he murmured, “What?”

“Have you never considered why His Imperial Majesty would give Mo Xi command of your remaining soldiers?” The black-clad man’s words stabbed into Gu Mang’s ears like a needle. “His Imperial Majesty had decided to assign him the Scarlet-Plumed Battalion. Why would a noble of purest blood end up commander of your Northern Frontier Army?”

Gu Mang felt his heart grow cold. That black-clad man’s teeth clicked. “Because of the Vow.”

The words were like a strike of lightning, like his insides had been set aflame.

“It was right after you personally stabbed him. He knelt before the throne room for three days and three nights, dragging his ailing body to plead for mercy on behalf of the men you left in Chonghua. He’s such a proud person…yet he trampled himself into the mud. Before the entire court, he vouched for you, pled your innocence—but what did he get for his pains? Wasn’t it just a dagger through the heart?”

The man continued, unstoppable, “Have you any idea how many in Chonghua mocked him? He already had his own enemies. Those nobles who were usually no match for him came to taunt him, saying he was a poor judge of character, that he was possessed, that it was his fault for not noticing the presence of a traitor like you in our midst. If only he had seen your true colors earlier, they said, those innocent people wouldn’t have died so horrifically. They blamed the entirety of the defeat and loss on him. He suffered the criticism leveled at him by the nation and the pain of your abandonment of him; the hatred he had for his country’s traitor and his abiding friendship with you.” The black-clad man enunciated every syllable, forging them into sharp blades that pierced Gu Mang’s soul.

“Did you imagine you were alone in enduring torment, living through a suffering you couldn’t speak of? While you were in hell, he was trapped by his circumstances, enduring a life worse than death in much the same way. Yet at least you went into hell knowing why. He was blind to everything. All of you lied to him, made choices for him, and cared nothing for his true feelings. Oh, Gu Mang…” The black-clad man’s voice dripped malice. “*You* forced his hand.”

Gu Mang cowered within the canopy as if stung by those venomous words, his face white as paper.

“It was you who refused to tell him anything and blinded his eyes. It was you who feared that if he asked you to stay, it would shake your resolve, so you selfishly sent him to the frontier. Yes, *you* dealt with it cleanly, but you didn’t even allow him to say a proper goodbye!”

“No…no…” Gu Mang clutched his head, curling up in the depths of the bedding. “No…”

“What *no*? How is it not so? Gu Mang, you trampled his faith, his dignity, and his light. You thought so highly of yourself; you really believed he’d walk the path you’d arranged, living a clean, pure, and worry-free life from then on. How stubbornly arrogant you were!”

Agony tore through his head. Gu Mang cowered like a cornered beast, wailing softly. “It wasn’t like that… I didn’t want him to…”

“So what if you didn’t want him to? That’s the truth of what happened,” the black-clad man mocked. “Your lies allowed His Imperial Majesty to use the lives of those thirty thousand soldiers against the two of you twice. The first was to force you to become a spy, and the second was to ensure Mo Xi would never rebel against him. That’s the *Vow of Calamity*,” the black-clad man said, his voice full of cruelty.

“For someone he thought had left him forever, your Xihe-jun gave up ten years of his life, swearing an oath to never betray His Imperial Majesty, never betray Chonghua. Gu Mang—I wonder if he told you this when you were crying about your grievances?”

It was a question asked by someone who already knew the answer. But it hit Gu Mang like the strike of a whip, setting his entire body shaking, his lips bloodless as they trembled.

I wonder if he told you this.

Mo Xi’s handsome, chiseled face seemed to appear before him. When those long lashes lowered, they hid all the shadows in his eyes.

He saw Mo Xi nuzzling his forehead, speaking quietly. “Shixiong, it’s fine now; everything’s over. We still have a lifetime ahead of us.”

He’d run the risk of shattering his own core to stubbornly uncover the truth of Gu Mang’s defection. He’d brought Gu Mang ashore, listened to Gu Mang’s suffering, understood Gu Mang’s heartbreak, and promised him whatever happened next, they would bear it together.

The only thing he didn’t do was show Gu Mang his own wounds. The only thing he didn’t do was tell Gu Mang their lifetime together had stopped being whole years ago. Unknown to nearly everyone, that decade of his life had long since become an oath to protect Gu Mang’s remaining subordinates.

“Do you know what the most ridiculous part is?” the black-clad man asked, taking note of Gu Mang’s anguish as he neared his breaking point. He took a step forward, his eyes overflowing with malice. “Gu Mang, the most ridiculous thing of all is that this oath of his was made completely in vain. You and His Imperial Majesty had already made a promise, but you kept him as ignorant as a fool, let him go sleepless with worry. If Mo Xi hadn’t sworn this vow, would the emperor have harmed your remaining soldiers? He would not.”

Poison gushed out, eating through Gu Mang’s flesh and bone.

Watching Gu Mang’s face, the black-clad man could see how chaotic his emotions were, how close his mind to destruction. Success was at hand. He was like a spider baring its fangs, advancing toward the prey trapped within his intricately crafted web. The final strike came like a bite through the throat—

“When the two of you joined hands to design your clever schemes, he was your first victim. Gu Mang, if I cared for Mo Xi at all, my greatest wish would be for him never to have met you.”

He watched Gu Mang shattering like porcelain in front of him, could almost hear the eerie cracking noises.

“It was you who ruined him.”

Like a bowstring snapping, Gu Mang howled, low and anguished, burying his head in the blankets. Spine curling, he tangled his fingers in his hair, voice a beast-like wail.

The Vow of Calamity. *The Vow of Calamity!*

He seemed to feel that gust of wind from the academy years ago. The silver birch rustled. Beneath the tree, that elegant youth eating a zongzi with delicate bites felt his gaze and turned to look quietly at him.

Those pristine black eyes, that young man he'd thought rare as unpolished jade at first sight…ended up the first fallen chess piece on his board, and he'd never even known.

"Xihe-jun, Wangshu-jun, Lu Zhanxing… Gu Mang, you think these people's sacrifices had nothing to do with you, but you're wrong. When you became His Imperial Majesty's right hand, when you two plotted for your righteous equality, they became pawns in your hands. You will never…be able to escape."

The black-clad man placed a slim jade scroll—the scroll that held the scene of Mo Xi swearing the oath—on Gu Mang's bed. He shot an expressionless glance outside the room. Already, strong spiritual energy pressed toward the quiet chamber. His time was up.

But he was certain of his success. The chance Gu Mang would endure this second blow was vanishingly small. He had even managed to steal the scroll containing the record of those ruthless events, which he now handed over to the man on the edge of insanity. He murmured, "You don't have to believe me; the jade scrolls can't be faked. Look what your misguided choices did to him."

With that, he sheathed his blade. Before Mo Xi could reach the room, the man darted to the roof like lightning and vanished from sight.

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Chapter 159:
The Knife's Edge

BY THE TIME MO XI and the emperor made it to Gu Mang's chamber, a crowd of cultivator guards had surrounded the room, but no one dared get close.

"This one greets Your Imperial Majesty!"

"This one greets Xihe-jun!"

The emperor came to a stop—a towering column of resentful demonic qi had burst from the room and shot toward the sky. The black flames twisted into the distorted shapes of claws in the air, then into the illusory head of a blue-eyed wolf.

"Where is the assassin?!" the emperor demanded.

The captain of the guards was ashen-faced, crossing his arms in salute as he answered, "This…this subordinate is useless—the assassin was skilled; they've already escaped… This subordinate h-has sent people after them."

Mo Xi turned to him. "What about Gu Mang?!"

This captain had of course heard the salacious tales circulating about Mo Xi and Gu Mang; upon being so suddenly interrogated like this, he broke into a cold sweat. Swallowing, he said fearfully, "By the time we got here, the black magic demonic qi had already erupted. This subordinate tried to enter the room, but, but…"

The emperor squinted at him. The guard was a pathetic sight—hair mussed, cheek smeared with soot, and the corner of his lips stained with blood yet to be wiped away. The rebuke on the tip of his tongue became a sigh. He looked up at the room enveloped in black magic qi. Beneath the stormy sky, the treatment chamber was overlaid with the swaying figure of a snow faewolf, ready to bare its white teeth and tear the crowd to shreds.

The captain desperately explained to Mo Xi. "Xihe-jun, the demonic qi in the room is too strong. No one can go in there. All we can do is get in

formation and wait outside. The instant Gu Mang goes berserk and emerges, we can—”

Mo Xi didn’t let him finish. Before anyone could move, he dashed alone through the intense demonic qi toward Gu Mang’s room.

“Mo Xi!” the emperor exclaimed.

“Xihe-jun—”

Waves of dark flame crashed down as Mo Xi flung aside the shocked and terrified shouts of the crowd. Surging demonic energy stabbed toward him like sharp blades, but perhaps because a flame lit by Gu Mang burned in his heart, he didn’t find the demonic qi so insurmountable an obstacle.

Or perhaps neither hell nor a sea of flames could hurt him, because his Gu Mang-gege was within that room.

In this world, there was nothing more painful than loss.

Mo Xi slammed open the door, and its yellow sandalwood creaked. Wild demonic fire surged out. He raised a hand to block the spiritual energy, so intense he could barely open his eyes, and peered into the depths of the room.

Gu Mang huddled on the bed in the treatment room; a history-recording jade scroll lay beside him, shattered by the explosion of demonic flames. His head hung down, face buried in his hands. Mo Xi saw his solitary figure curled up like a beast, but he couldn’t see his face.

“Gu Mang…”

He rushed to his side, but before he could touch his shoulder, he was thrown off by a burst of demonic qi. Gu Mang looked up; that beautiful face was crawling with black magic sigils, his eyes filled with blood and his blue irises glimmering with dreadful light.

He had already begun to mutate.

Whatever lucidity lingered in his features was submerged by the agony carved into his face. Gu Mang seemed to be teetering on the edge, delirious as he faced the man in front of him.

“You achieved nothing…” Gu Mang rasped. He stared at Mo Xi, but the words didn’t seem to be addressed to him. His nose wrinkled, eyes

flashing with frantic sparks. “You achieved *nothing* of what you promised me! Liar!”

Before Mo Xi could react, Gu Mang had his hands clamped around Mo Xi’s throat. He seemed to have sunk completely into his own madness. His blue eyes flicked back and forth across the room as he stood, one hand tightening around Mo Xi’s neck as he pressed closer.

“I didn’t ask you to exonerate me. The people I killed, the blood I shed in those years—I can bear it, and I always planned to bear it alone! But what the hell did you take me for?”

Mo Xi was growing lightheaded. Gripping Gu Mang’s arms, he mumbled, “Gu Mang…”

Reflected in Gu Mang’s eyes was not his little shidi, but the emperor of eight years ago who stood upon the Golden Terrace on that rainy night. The ruler who had let Mo Xi swear the Vow in the throne room.

Gu Mang cocked his head, each word ground between his teeth. “My army, my brothers, my reputation, my memories… I have nothing left. I concealed myself for eight years and became a creature neither human nor demon…and you? The peace you promised me—did you realize it? The equal world you swore to build—have you made it come true? You’ve exhausted every possible target of your schemes—can’t you leave me alone? I’ve had *enough*! Don’t tell me about your glorious tactics! You *disgust me*!”

Humans were not saints. Who could walk through this world and bear no grudges? The angry resentment in his heart, the grievance that had been locked behind rationality—the demonic qi fanned the flames of these emotions to towering heights.

With one vicious strike, Gu Mang pinned Mo Xi to the wall. He stared into Mo Xi’s eyes, trapped in his own pain and madness, incapable of recognizing the person in front of him. His mind was lost in chaos. Demonic energy coiled around his scarred body, rampaging through his veins as curse marks streamed from his heart to his arms, his neck, over his cheeks and brow.

“Gu Mang…” Mo Xi struggled to pry loose Gu Mang’s spasming hands without harming him. “Look… It’s…” He coughed. “It’s me…!”

What on earth had happened here? The “assassin” hadn’t killed him—he’d obviously told Gu Mang something explosive, something that had broken Gu Mang’s mind and shaken him to pieces.

What had he said?!

Mo Xi grunted as Gu Mang slammed him against the wall with a dull *thud*. The faewolf of dark flame surged behind him, his irises so blue they seemed to glow.

Bestial madness slowly eclipsed human rationality in those eyes, swallowing everything but the agony reddening their rims.

“Why…couldn’t I keep Lu Zhanxing…” His tirade softened into tormented mumbling, heavy with self-reproach. “Why…was Murong Lian attacked because of me…”

He grew less intelligible as his voice choked with sorrow. “Why…” He hung his head in despair, shoulders shaking minutely. “Why…did Mo Xi have to go so far… I was the one who forced his hand… It was me…”

That black-clad man’s cruel words echoed in his ears, the truths he’d divulged cutting into his head like knives, piercing his throat, shredding his heart and organs into a mutilated mess of flesh. Fat tears rolled down cheeks marked by demonic scars, and the fire burned higher with his torment.

His body, which had once remained scaldingly hot through any storm, would be rent asunder and swallowed up like this. His consciousness was being eaten up bit by bit as the black magic sigils crept toward his fingertips.

“It was me…” Gu Mang sobbed. “I failed in everything… I made all of you pawns on the board…”

Zhanxing.

Murong.

Mo Xi…

Voice cracking, Gu Mang wailed, “Why did you make him take the *Vow*?”

Stunned, Mo Xi's gaze found the destroyed history-recording jade scroll. The pieces suddenly fell into place.

Gu Mang's grieving sobs seemed bloodily torn from his throat. Like a trapped and dying beast, he cried piteously: "Why did you force him to take the Vow… Why did you have to hurt him so much… I just wanted him to have a better life… All along, I wished for him to have a better life… But I was the one who ruined it…"

I was so arrogant; I thought myself so clever. I didn't leave him a way out; I wasn't willing to tell him the truth. And this was the outcome.

Gu Mang, Gu Mang…oh, you're much too clever.

Mindless, Gu Mang pinned Mo Xi down with such force that blood seeped from beneath his black lapels. Pressed close like this, the turbulent black magic qi was like countless sharp needles stabbing into Mo Xi's bones, bringing the pain of a thousand cuts, destroying his defenses.

Mo Xi endured the agony; he resisted the oppressive qi to lift his hands, inch by shaking inch—until at last, he cupped Gu Mang's contorted face. The taste of blood surged up his throat as he lowered his head to gaze into Gu Mang's eyes. He wanted to speak, but the pressure of the black magic energy was suffocating. In the end, no words escaped his lips. Only one trembling fingertip came up to touch the lotus sigil on the side of Gu Mang's neck.

I'll stay with you.

When I'm not here, this sword array will protect you.

If you need me, if you're willing to let me know, if you can trust me… All you have to do is say my name, Shixiong.

I'll always come to your side.

His past promises were like fragile snow, burnt to ash by violent demonic flames. This ferocious spiritual flow enveloped Gu Mang's body. The closer Mo Xi came to it, the worse it hurt. As Mo Xi caressed the sigil on his neck, the skin of his fingers was burned raw and bloody, but he stubbornly refused to flinch back. He resisted the pain, breaking through all misunderstanding with trust, cutting through all hatred with forgiveness—

his pristine soul passed through the black magic curse, and he brought Gu Mang tightly into his arms.

He could feel Gu Mang trembling, could feel the demonic energy seeping through his own skin and staining his organs. But what did it matter? He kept his promise. Just like when he was young and promised his Gu Mang-gege before going on campaign, that no matter how dangerous the path, he would return to his side.

When he loved someone, it was for a lifetime. It had nothing to do with lineage, with identity, with time.

He had never lied to Gu Mang—and perhaps this time, in this instant, Gu Mang would finally believe him. Ever since that day when he was young, the promises he made were for a lifetime, from the moment they left his lips.

“Yes, the Vow,” Mo Xi whispered. “Look… Shixiong, look how silly I am. Could you stay and look after me? I spent ten years of my life so you would look after me again. Don’t let me be silly anymore. Won’t you…”

Mo Xi coughed weakly, bloody spittle staining the corners of his lips. He closed his eyes and brought a hand to the back of Gu Mang’s head, taking this demon feared by all into his arms like a cherished treasure.

“Won’t you please stay?”

Gu Mang opened his eyes wide, looking at him with hazy uncertainty.

In the silence, two lotus flower sword arrays burst to glorious life. Blade met blade, but because neither wished to hurt the other, they scattered into countless glimmering feathers that drifted down around them.

The moment that brilliant blue light flared, the black magic qi snuffed out. The curse marks covering Gu Mang disappeared beneath his skin. Tears streamed down his cheeks, and that water seemed to wash the confusion from his eyes, dispelling the demonic miasma and leaving the crystal-blue of deep lakes. Gradually, focus returned to Gu Mang’s gaze. “Mo…Mo Xi?” he murmured.

Before Mo Xi could answer, he choked out a sob. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry…” He couldn’t hold himself together any longer. “I…I didn’t want to

harm you, I didn’t want to force you into it… I really… I didn’t know you would…you would… That’s *ten years*…”

He didn’t say any more; he was crying too hard to speak.

How many decades are there in a lifetime? Why were you so stubborn, offering up your life for someone you thought betrayed you?

Mo Xi embraced him, stroking his hair and kissing the top of his head. “Yes,” he whispered. “Ten years.” Clutching him tightly, he rasped, “So…you must always be well. Otherwise, I’ll be very angry. If I’m angry…won’t my life get even shorter?”

Those long lashes were wet when he blinked.

“To stay with me a little while longer, even just one more day—Shixiong, you have to be good.”

Gu Mang wept in breathless silence.

“Don’t become a demon, don’t blame yourself. Don’t leave me.”

Mo Xi reached out to gently wipe the tear tracks from Gu Mang’s face. Covered in blood, he held Gu Mang. His injuries were heavy too, but still he protected him. Mo Xi pressed his chin to the top of Gu Mang’s head, the rims of his eyes red and wet, smiling wanly as he tried to comfort him.

“You have to…day by day…spend the rest of your life taking care of this home with me. Okay?”

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APPENDIX

Characters, Names, and Locations

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Appendix:
Characters, Names, and Locations

Characters

Mo Xi

Surname Mo; Given Name Xi, “extinguish”

Titles: Xihe-jun (/ “sun,” literary), General Mo

Weapons:

Shuairan (/ a mythical snake): A whip that can transform into a sword as needed. Named after a snake from Chinese mythology, said to respond so quickly an attack to any part of its body would be met immediately with its fangs or tail (or both). First mentioned in Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* as an ideal for commanders to follow when training their armies.

Tuntian (/ “Skyswallower”): A scepter cast with the essence of a whale spirit.

The commander of the Northern Frontier Army, Mo Xi is the only living descendant of the illustrious Mo Clan. Granted the title Xihe-jun by the late emperor, he possesses extraordinary innate spiritual abilities and has a reputation for being coldly ruthless.

Gu Mang

Surname Gu, “to look”; Given Name Mang, “bewilderment”

Titles: Beast of the Altar, General Gu

Weapons:

Yongye (/ “Evernight”): A demonic dagger from the Liao Kingdom.

Fengbo (/ “Wind and waves”): A suona used by General Gu.

Once the dazzling shixiong of the cultivation academy, Murong Lian's slave, and war general to the empire of Chonghua, Gu Mang fell from grace and turned traitor, defecting to the enemy Liao Kingdom. Years later, he was sent back to Chonghua as a prisoner of war. His name comes from the line "I unsheathe my sword and look around bewildered" in the first of three poems in the collection "Arduous Journey" by Li Bai, lamenting the sense of loss and obstruction the poet faced upon being sent away from the capital by Emperor Xuanzong.

Murong Lian

Surname Murong; Given Name Lian, "mercy"

Title: Wangshu-jun (/ "moon," literary)

Weapon:

Water Demon Talisman ( ): A talisman that becomes a horde of water demons to attack its target.

Gu Mang's former master and cousin to the current emperor, Murong Lian is the current lord of Wangshu Manor and the owner of Luomei Pavilion. He is known as the "Greed" of Chonghua's three poisons.

Jiang Yexue

Surname Jiang; Given Name Yexue, "evening snow"

Title: Qingxu Elder (/ "clear dawn")

Disowned son of the Yue Clan, Yue Chenqing's older brother, and Mo Xi's old friend, Jiang Yexue is a gentleman to the core.

Yue Chenqing

Surname Yue; Given Name Chenqing, "morning sun"

Title: Deputy General Yue

Young master of the Yue Clan and Murong Chuyi's nephew, Yue Chenqing is a happy-go-lucky child with a penchant for getting into trouble.

Murong Chuyi

Surname Murong; Given Name Chuyi, surname Chu, “clothes”

Yue Chenqing’s Fourth Uncle, Chonghua’s “Ignorance,” and all-around enigma, Murong Chuyi is a master artificer whose true motivations remain unknown.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

Auntie Lin

A servant in Wangshu Manor with a disfigured face.

Changfeng-jun

“long, abundance”

An older noble worrying himself sick over his daughter Lan-er.

Chen Tang

Surname Chen, Given Name Tang, “flowering apple”

Chonghua’s legendary Wise Gentleman, who was once the headmaster of the cultivation academy as well as guoshi of the nation. He perished in battle with Hua Po’an, a slave cultivator-turned-traitor whom he had personally taught.

The Emperor

Title: His Imperial Majesty, “junshang”

Eccentric ruler of the empire of Chonghua. Due to the cultural taboo against using the emperor's given name in any context, he is only ever addressed and referred to as "His Imperial Majesty."

Fandou

"bib"

A loyal black dog and Gu Mang's best friend.

Guoshi of the Liao Kingdom

"imperial preceptor"

A mercurial and immensely powerful Liao Kingdom official who conceals his true identity behind a golden mask.

Hua Po'an

"flower breaking the darkness"

Chonghua's infamous first slave general. After learning cultivation under the beneficence of Chen Tang, Hua Po'an turned on Chonghua and became the founding monarch of the Liao Kingdom.

Jiang Fuli

Surname Jiang; Given Name Fuli, "to brush away, multitudes"

Also known by his title of Medicine Master, Jiang Fuli is the finest healer in Chonghua, dubbed the "Wrath" of Chonghua's three poisons.

Jingchen

"Purify filth"

The weakened form of the Demonblood Beast and the Liao Kingdom guoshi's pet obsession.

Lan-er

“orchid”

A sweet little girl with a dangerously volatile spiritual core.

Li Wei

Surname Li; Given Name Wei, “slight”

The competent, if harried, head housekeeper of Xihe Manor.

Lu Zhanxing

Surname Lu; Given Name Zhanxing, “to exhibit stars”

Gu Mang’s oldest friend, who grew up with him as a slave in Wangshu Manor. Later his deputy general of the Wangba Army.

Murong Mengze

Surname Murong; Given Name Mengze, “Yunmeng Lake”

A master healer and the “Virtue” of Chonghua’s three gentlemen, Princess Mengze’s frail constitution and graceful, refined manner are known to all.

Murong Xuan

Surname Murong, given name Xuan, “dark”

The late Wangshu-jun, Murong Lian’s father.

Su Yurou

Surname Su; Given Name Yurou, “jade, soft”

Known as the most peerless beauty in Chonghua. Jiang Fuli’s reclusive wife.

Yue Juntian

Surname Yue, given name Juntian, “great sky”

The patriarch of the Yue Clan and a master artificer.

Zhao Susu (Madam Zhao)

Surname Zhao, given name Susu, “pure”

Murong Xuan’s wife and Murong Lian’s mother, a beautiful woman of aristocratic birth.

Zhou He

Surname Zhou, given name He, “crane”

Weapon:

Lieying ( ): A pitch-black dagger.

The leader of Sishu Terrace. Obsessed with discovering new magical techniques using any means necessary.

Locations

Dongting Lake

A real lake in northeastern Hunan, named “Grotto Court Lake” for the dragon court that was said to reside in its depths.

Luomei Pavilion

“Gardens of Fallen Plum Blossoms”

A house of pleasure where the nobility of Chonghua could have their pick of captives from enemy nations.

Shennong Terrace

The healers' ministry of Chonghua. Shennong is the deity and mythological ruler said to have taught agriculture and herbal medicine to the ancient Chinese people.

Warrior Soul Mountain

Where the heroes of Chonghua are laid to rest.

Cixin Artificing Forge

"Kind Heart"

A shabby forge in Chonghua's capital where uncommonlyhumane spiritual weapons are refined.

Dream Butterfly Islands

An archipelago of demonic islands not far from Chonghua. The archipelago is composed of around twenty islands, and different types of demons live on each one.

Da'ze City

"Large Pond"

One of Chonghua's major border cities, located near a lake, where Chen Tang once sealed the Demonblood Beast.

Bat Island

One of the Dream Butterfly Islands, Bat Island is inhabited by fire bats, demons descended from the feathered tribe of Mount Jiuhua. The bats on their island are led by their queen, Wuyan.

Sishu Terrace

"Overseeing Magic"

An organization in Chonghua specializing in magical techniques and healing.

Golden Terrace

The most secretive and secluded hall at the back of the imperial palace, reserved for the emperor's most trusted subjects.

Name Guide

Diminutives, nicknames, and name tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

Doubling: Doubling a syllable of a person's name can be a nickname, e.g., "Mangmang"; it has childish or cutesy connotations.

Xiao-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

Lao-: A familiar prefix meaning "old." Usually used for older men.

-er: An affectionate diminutive added to names, literally "son" or "child." Always a suffix.

Family

Di/Didi: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

Ge/Gege/Dage: Older brother or an older male friend.

Jie/Jiejie/Zizi: Older sister or an older female friend.

-jiu/Jiujiu: Maternal uncle.

Cultivation

Shifu: Teacher or master.

Shixiong: Older martial brother, used for older disciples or classmates.

Shidi: Younger martial brother, used for younger disciples or classmates.

Daozhang/Xianjun/Xianzhang/Shenjun: Polite terms of address for cultivators. Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone's family name.

Zongshi: A title or suffix for a person of particularly outstanding skill; largely only applied to cultivators.

Other

Gongzi: Young man from an affluent household.

Guozhu: The ruler of a nation.

-jun: A term of respect, often used as a suffix after a title.

Laoban: A term of address for a shopkeeper or the proprietor of a business that means "boss."

-niang: Suffix for a young lady, similar to "Miss."

Shaozhu: Young master and direct heir of a household.

-xiansheng: A polite suffix for a man, similar to "Mister."

Xiongzhang: Respectful term of address meaning "older brother."

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Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some (as in "de" in the title below) are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of Remnants of Filth.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NAMES

Yú Wū

Yú: Y as in **y**ou, ú as in "u" in the French "tu"

Wū as in **woo**

Mò Xī

Mò as in **mo**urning

Xī as in **chi**c

Gù Máng

Gù as in **goo**p

Máng as in **mong**rel

Mùróng Lián

Mù as in **moo**n

Róng as in **wrong /** c**rone**
Lián as in batta**lion**

Yuè Chénqíng
Yuè: Y as in **y**ammer, uè as in **whe**lp
Chén as in ki**tchen**
Qíng as in ma**tching**

Jiāng Yèxuě
Jiāng as in mah**jong**
Yè as in **ye**s
Xuě: X as in **sh**oot, uě as in **we**t

Mùróng Chǔyī
Mù as in **moo**n
Róng as in **wrong** / c**ron**e
Chǔ as in **choo**se
Yī as in **ea**se

Mùróng Mèngzé
Mù as in **mo**on
Róng as in **wrong** / c**ron**e
Mèng as in a**mong**
Zé as in pia**zza**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **c**h as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

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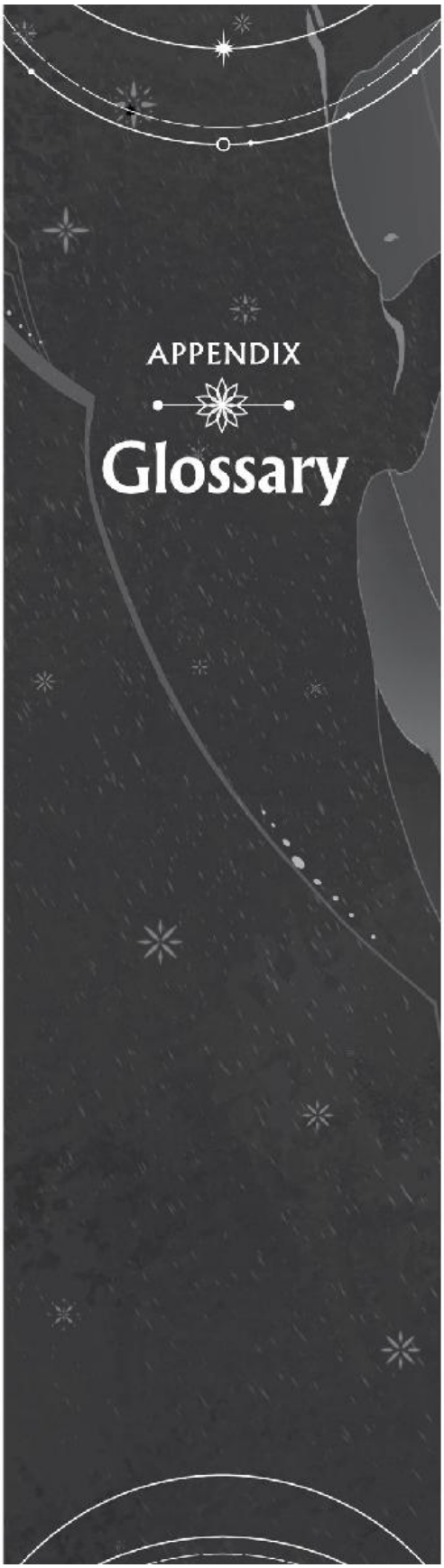

APPENDIX

Glossary

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Appendix:
Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context for the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel as well as provide a starting point for learning more about the rich culture from which these stories were written.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (　/ “indulgence in beauty”) is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys’ love) genre in Japanese media and is better understood as a genre of plot than a genre of setting. For example, though many danmei novels feature wuxia or xianxia settings, others are better understood as tales of sci-fi, fantasy, or horror.

Wuxia

Wuxia (　/ “martial heroes”) is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres. Most wuxia stories are set in ancient China and feature protagonists who practice martial arts and seek to redress wrongs. Although characters may possess seemingly superhuman abilities, they are typically mastered through practice instead of supernatural or magical means. Plots tend to focus on human relationships and power struggles between various sects and alliances. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example of the genre is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (　/ “immortal heroes”) is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Some xianxia works focus on immortal beings such as gods or demons, whereas others (such as *Remnants of Filth*) are concerned with the conflicts of mortals who practice cultivation. In the latter case, characters strive to become stronger by harnessing their spiritual powers, with some aiming to extend their lifespan or achieve immortality.

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TERMINOLOGY

Cowrie shells: Cowrie shells were the earliest form of currency used in central China.

Cultivation/cultivators: Cultivation is the means by which mortals with spiritual aptitude develop and harness supernatural abilities. The practitioners of these methods are called cultivators. The path of one's cultivation is a concept that draws heavily from Daoist traditions. Generally, it comprises innate spiritual development (i.e., formation of a spiritual core) as well as spells, talismans, tools, and weapons with specific functions.

Di and shu hierarchy: Upper-class men in ancient China often took multiple wives, though only one would be the official or "di" wife, and her sons would take precedence over the sons of the "shu" wives. "Di" sons were prioritized in matters of inheritance.

Dual Cultivation: A cultivation technique involving sex between participants that is meant to improve cultivation prowess. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

Ephemera: In the world of *Remnants of Filth*, a drug from the Liao Kingdom. Its name is likely a reference to the line, "Life is like a dream ephemeral, how short our joys can be," from "A Party Amidst Brothers in the Peach Blossom Garden" by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

Eyes: Descriptions like "phoenix eyes" or "peach-blossom eyes" refer to eye shape. Phoenix eyes have an upturned sweep at their far corners, whereas peach-blossom eyes have a rounded upper lid and are often considered particularly alluring. Almond eyes have a balanced shape, like their namesake.

Face: Mianzi ( ), generally translated as “face,” is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person’s reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. “Thin face” refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, “thick face” refers to someone who acts brazenly and without shame.

Foxglove Tree: The foxglove tree, *Paulownia tomentosa* (/ paotonghua), also known as empress tree or princess tree, is native to China. In flower language, the foxglove tree symbolizes “eternal waiting,” specifically that of a secret admirer.

Foxtail Grass: In flower language, green foxtail grass, Setaria viridis (/ gouweibacao), symbolizes “secret, difficult yearning,” often in reference to star-crossed love.

Gentleman: The term junzi ( ) is used to refer to someone of noble character. Historically, it was typically reserved for men.

Gu Poison: A legendary poison created by sealing many types of venomous creatures in one vessel until only one survivor remains, which would then possess the strongest and most complex poison. The term may be used as a stand-in for dark poisons of all types.

Guoshi: A powerful imperial official who served as an advisor to the emperor. Sometimes translated as “state preceptor,” this was a post with considerable authority in some historical regimes.

Horsetail Whisk: Consisting of a long wooden handle with horsehair bound to one end, the horsetail whisk (/ fuchen, “brushing off dust”) symbolizes cleanliness and the sweeping away of mortal concerns in

Buddhist and Daoist traditions. It is usually carried in the crook of one's arm.

Immortal-Binding Ropes or Cables: A staple of xianxia, immortal-binding cables are ropes, nets, and other restraints enchanted to withstand the power of an immortal or god. They can only be cut by high-powered spiritual items or weapons and often limit the abilities of those trapped by them.

Incense Time: A measure of time in ancient China, referring to how long it takes for a single incense stick to burn. Inexact by nature, an incense time is commonly assumed to be about thirty minutes, though it can be anywhere from five minutes to an hour.

Jade: Jade is a semi-precious mineral with a long history of ornamental and functional usage in China. The word "jade" can refer to two distinct minerals, nephrite and jadeite, which both range in color from white to gray to a wide spectrum of greens.

Jianghu: A staple of wuxia and xianxia, the jianghu (/ "rivers and lakes") describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes.

Kowtow: The kowtow (/ "knock head") is an act of prostration where one kneels and bows low enough that their forehead touches the ground. A show of deep respect and reverence that can also be used to beg, plead, or show sincerity; in severe circumstances, it's common for the supplicant's forehead to end up bloody and bruised.

Lotus: This flower symbolizes purity of the heart and mind, as lotuses rise untainted from muddy waters. It also signifies the holy seat of the Buddha.

Liuli: Colorful glazed glass. When used as a descriptor for eye color, it refers to a bright brown.

Meridians: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream. Medical and combat techniques that focus on redirecting, manipulating, or halting qi circulation focus on targeting the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints. Techniques that can manipulate or block qi prevent a cultivator from using magical techniques until the qi block is lifted.

Mythical Creatures: Several entities from Chinese mythology make an appearance in the world of *Remnants of Filth*, including:

Azure Dragon: The Azure Dragon (/ canglong, or / qinglong) is one of four major creatures in Chinese astronomy, representing the cardinal direction East, the element of wood, and the season of spring.

Bixi: A legendary figure who was the sixth son of the Dragon King, usually depicted as a dragon with the shell of a tortoise and traditionally used as the base of commemorative tablets.

Flame Emperor: A mythological figure said to have ruled over China in ancient times. His name is attributed to his invention of slash-and-burn agriculture. There is some debate over whether the Flame Emperor is the same being as Shennong, the inventor of agriculture, or a descendant.

Guhuo niao: A mythical bird created by the grief of women who died in childbirth; their song mimics the sound of babies crying as the bird seeks to steal chicks and human infants for itself.

Shangao: A small piglike animal said to live in the mountains, vivid scarlet in color, with a decidedly foul manner of speech.

Taotie: A mythical beast that represents greed, as it is composed of only a head and a mouth and eats everything in sight until its death. Taotie designs are symmetrical down their zoomorphic faces and most commonly seen on bronzeware from the Shang dynasty.

Tengshe, or Soaring snake: A mythical serpent that can fly.

Xingtian: A mythical deity who was decapitated in his battle with the Yellow Emperor but nevertheless continued to fight; a symbol of perseverance.

Xuannü: Also known as the Dark Lady, the goddess of sex, longevity, and war.

Zhen niao: Also known as the poison-feather bird, this mythical creature is said to be so poisonous its feathers were used in assassinations, as dipping one in wine would make it a lethal and undetectable poison.

Nine Provinces: A symbolic term for China as a whole.

Paper Money: Imitation money made from decorated sheets of paper burned as a traditional offering to the dead.

Qi: Qi ( ) is the energy in all living things. Cultivators strive to manipulate qi through various techniques and tools, such as weapons, talismans, and magical objects. Different paths of cultivation provide control over specific types of qi. For example, in *Remnants of Filth*, the Liao Kingdom's techniques allow cultivators to harness demonic qi, in

contrast to Chonghua's righteous methods, which cultivate the immortal path. In naturally occurring contexts, immortal qi may have nourishing or purifying properties, whereas malevolent qi (often refined via evil means such as murder) can poison an individual's mind or body.

Qiankun Pouch: A common item in wuxia and xianxia settings, a qiankun pouch contains an extradimensional space within it, to which its name (/ "universe") alludes. It is capable of holding far more than its physical exterior dimensions would suggest.

Qin: Traditional plucked stringed instrument in the zither family, usually played with the body placed flat on a low table. This was the favored instrument of scholars and the aristocracy.

Qinggong: Literally "lightness technique," qinggong ( ) refers to the martial arts skill of moving swiftly and lightly through the air. In wuxia and xianxia settings, characters use qinggong to leap great distances and heights.

Seal Script: Ancient style of Chinese writing developed during the Qin dynasty, named for its usage in seals, engravings, and other inscriptions.

Shichen: Days were split into twelve intervals of two hours apiece called shichen (/ "time"). Each of these shichen has an associated term. Prior to the Han dynasty, semi-descriptive terms were used. Post-Han dynasty, the shichen were renamed to correspond to the twelve zodiac animals.

Hour of Zi, midnight: 11 p.m.–1 a.m.

Hour of Chou: 1–3 a.m.

Hour of Yin: 3–5 a.m.

Hour of Mao, sunrise: 5–7 a.m.

Hour of Chen: 7–9 a.m.

Hour of Si: 9–11 a.m.

Hour of Wu, noon: 11 a.m.–1 p.m.

Hour of Wei: 1–3 p.m.

Hour of Shen: 3–5 p.m.

Hour of You, sunset: 5–7 p.m.

Hour of Xu, dusk: 7–9 p.m.

Hour of Hai: 9–11 p.m.

Souls: According to Chinese philosophy and religion, every human had three ethereal souls (hun /) which would leave the body after death, and seven corporeal souls (po /) that remained with the corpse. Each soul governed different aspects of a person's being, ranging from consciousness and memory, to physical function and sensation.

Spiritual Core: A spiritual core (/ linghe) is the foundation of a cultivator's power. It is typically formed only after ten years of hard work and study. If broken or damaged, the cultivator's abilities are compromised or even destroyed.

Suona: A traditional Chinese double-reeded wind instrument with a distinct and high-pitched sound, most often used for celebrations of the living and the dead (such as weddings and funerals). Said to herald either great joy or devastating grief.

Sword glare: Jianguang (/ "sword light"), an energy attack released from a sword's edge, often seen in xianxia stories.

A Tale of Nanke: An opera by Tang Xianzu that details a dream had by disillusioned official Chunyu Fen, highlighting the ephemerality of the mortal world and the illusory nature of wealth and grandeur.

Talismans: Strips of paper with written incantations, often in cinnabar ink or blood. They can serve as seals or be used as one-time spells.

Three Disciplines and Three Poisons: Also known as the threefold training in Buddhist traditions, the three disciplines are virtue, mind, and wisdom. Conversely, the three poisons (also known as the three defilements) refer to the three Buddhist roots of suffering: greed, wrath, ignorance.

Wangshu: In Chinese mythology, Wangshu ( ) is a lunar goddess often used in literary reference to the moon.

Xihe: In Chinese mythology, Xihe ( ) is a solar goddess often used in literary reference to the sun.

Xun: A traditional Chinese vessel flute similar to the ocarina, often made of clay.

Yin Energy and Yang Energy: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy which describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever energy they lack.

Ziwei Star: A star known to Western astronomers as the North Star or Polaris. As the other stars seemed to revolve around it, the Ziwei Star is considered the celestial equivalent of the emperor. Its stationary position in

the sky makes it key to Zi Wei Dou Shu, the form of astrology that the ancient Chinese used to divine mortal destinies.

Zi Wei Dou Shu Divination: Zi Wei Dou Shu (/ “purple star astrology”) is a common system of astrology in Chinese culture, which predicts one’s fortune by plotting the position of certain stars at the time of one’s birth. The presence of stars in certain “palaces,” or sections of the sky, indicates either an auspicious or inauspicious destiny with regard to different aspects of one’s life. Zi Wei, also known as Polaris, the North Star, is a primary star that represents the emperor or leadership.

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Footnotes

Chapter 136: Dragon Boat Festival

[1] A holiday on the fifth day of the fifth month in the lunar calendar, celebrated by holding dragon boat races and eating zongzi, sticky rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves.

[2] Shishu, a term of address for one's martial uncle, is used here as a general term of respect for a male cultivator of an older generation.

Chapter 141: Return to Battle

[3] From "No Clothes," poem in The Book of Songs about the solidarity of the Qin army: "who says we have no clothes, for we share the same robes of battle." The word for comrade (/ tongpao) literally means to share the "same robe."

Chapter 142: The Real Authority of the Liao Kingdom

[4] "Madman" by Du Fu, a Tang dynasty poet. It describes beautiful natural scenery in contrast to the poet's pathetic circumstances, highlighting his tenacity in refusing to be cowed by his environment.

Chapter 143: Sharing a Bed

[5] In traditional Chinese medicine, inflammation is associated with an accumulation of excessive heat, or male yang energy, within the body.

Chapter 156: Murong Lian's Memories (Part 2)

[6] , Lin, forms the top half of the character , Chu.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rou Bao Bu Chi Rou (“Meatbun Doesn’t Eat Meat”) was a low-level soldier who served in Gu Mang’s army as a cook. Meatbun’s cooking was so good that, after Gu Mang turned traitor, the spirit beast Cai Bao (“Veggiebun”) swooped in to rescue Meatbun as it passed by. Thus, Meatbun escaped interrogation in Chonghua and became a lucky survivor. In order to repay the big orange cat Veggiebun, Meatbun not only cooked three square meals a day but also told the tale of Mo Xi and Gu Mang as a nightly bedtime story to coax the spirit beast Veggiebun to sleep. Once the saga came to an end, it was compiled into *Remnants of Filth*.

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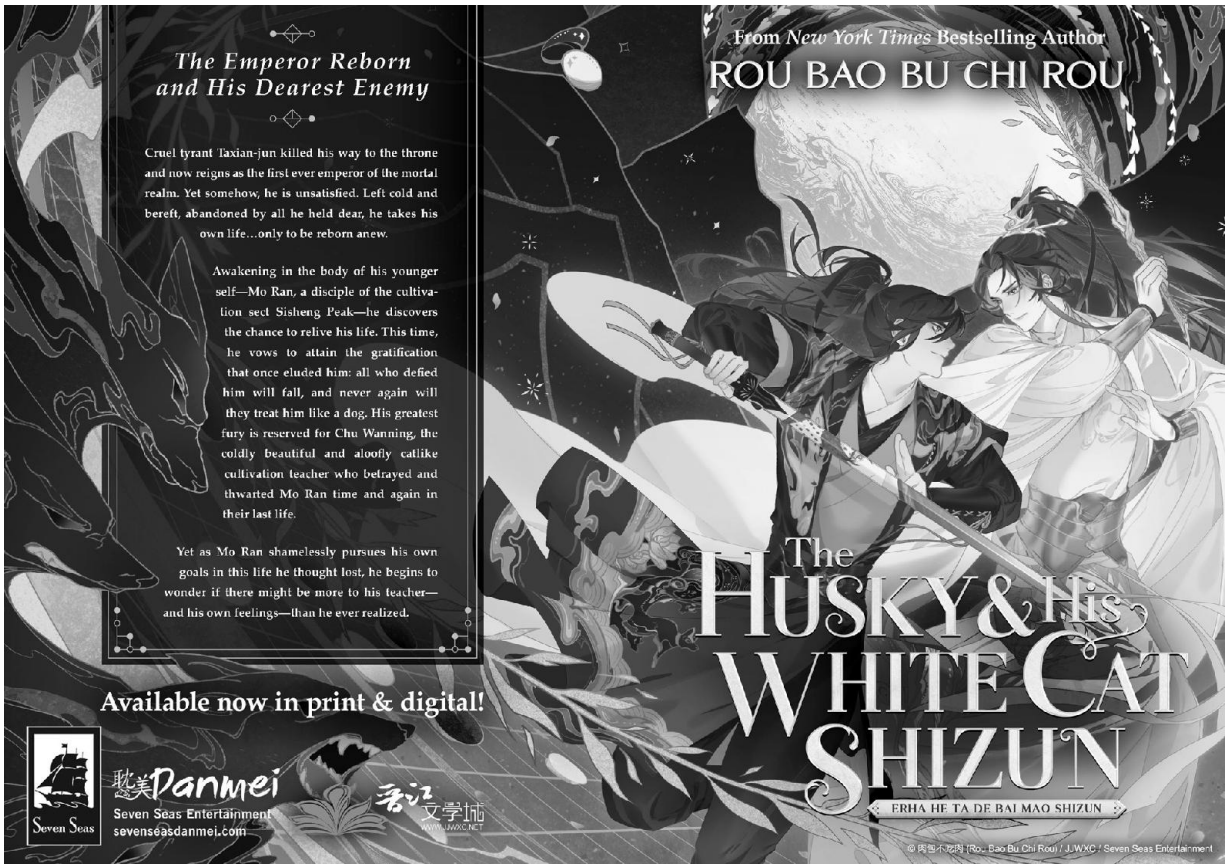
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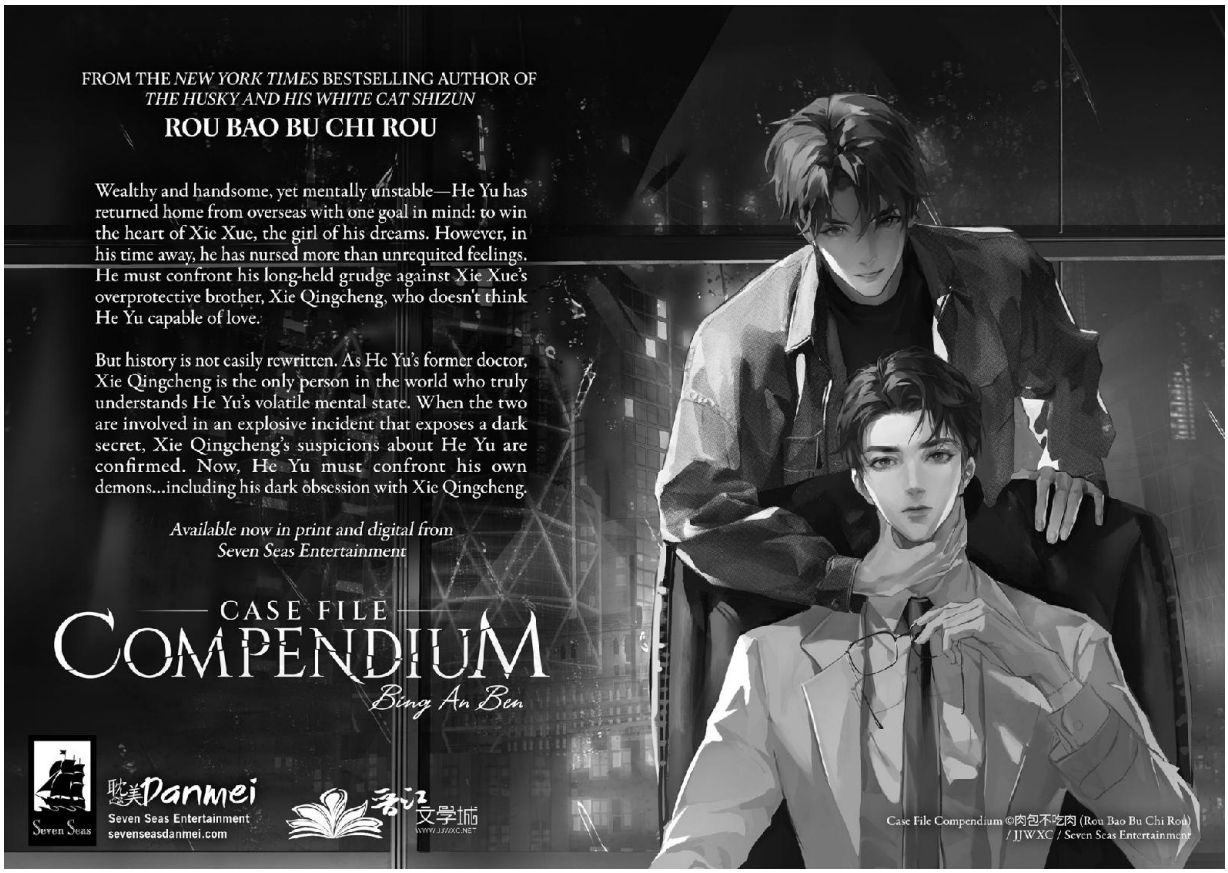
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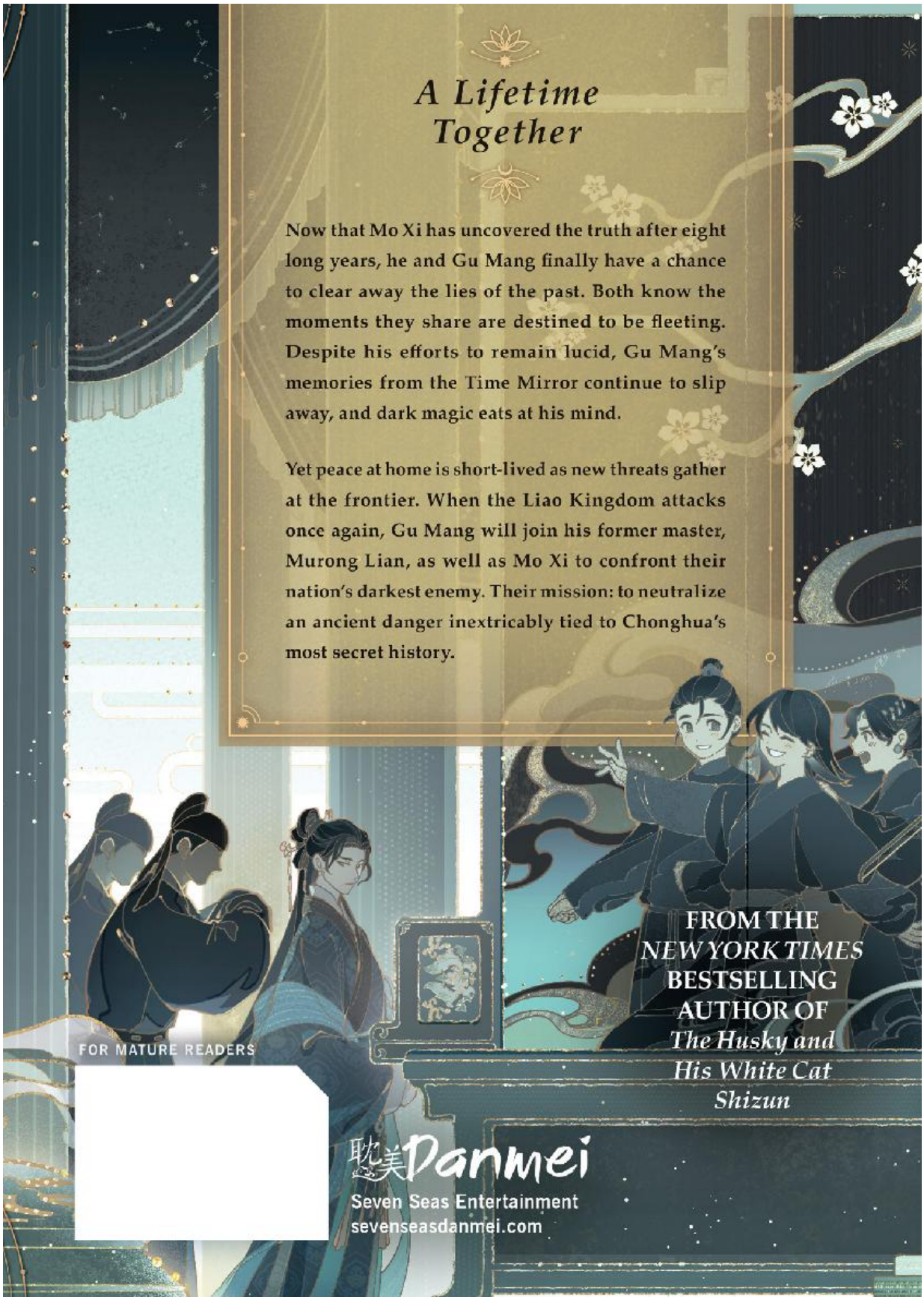
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